

Article minimizes marijuana's link to child deaths

By Sheila Polk

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In his article “Facts show Polk’s claim about marijuana deaths among children is misleading,” (June 22 online and June 26 in print), Ben Giles falls head over heels trying to minimize the Arizona Fatality Report that links marijuana use to 62 child deaths in Arizona in 2013. This is eerily reminiscent of the Big Tobacco lobby in the 1980s and 1990s which kept trying to tell us “associated” health risks were not the same as “directly caused” problems with tobacco.

Here it is, straight from the report: “In 2013, marijuana was the most commonly used substance associated with a child’s death in Arizona.” It doesn’t get any clearer than that. We simply cannot fathom why anyone concerned with public health would want to minimize this point. If this were any drug other than marijuana, Mr. Giles and others would join the growing group of concerned folks who see that marijuana is a harmful, addictive drug.

But unfortunately, those who are in favor of marijuana legalization immediately go on the attack when a new journal article or scientific study is released that does not support their own agenda. They attack because they are afraid that if the truth about marijuana is known, more people would come to the conclusion that legalization is bad for our kids, their futures, and our communities.

Let us be clear: When the marijuana lobby tells people marijuana is safer than alcohol, it is they who are raising the health risks associated with alcohol. We agree with them that alcohol is dangerous. But the same report that shows alcohol is associated with child fatalities in Arizona also makes the same point, with the same language, about marijuana—and finds marijuana was involved in more child fatalities in 2013 than alcohol. Why does the marijuana lobby get to speak of alcohol’s related and associated health risks but we — who have a long record in substance abuse prevention — cannot speak also of marijuana’s health risks?

Mr. Giles also dismisses the 16 percent increase in Arizona’s high school students as just a “few teens” who will likely try marijuana if it is legal. In fact, 16 percent means 32,000 of our students who have never tried marijuana would be more likely to try it if legal. Another 76,000 who have tried it will be more likely to use it. The point is clear to anyone who has studied the trend in other states, as we have in Colorado. Legality begets more availability and more availability begets more use.

To read Mr. Giles’ and the marijuana lobby’s position, one would think they have found the first product ever whose legalization was sought in order not to maximize sales and consumption. Still, Mr. Giles and others keep stating the marijuana legalization effort is aimed at legalizing the product for adults, not children. Let us remind: Alcohol is also only permitted for adult use, but somehow over 24 percent of Arizona’s teens consume it regularly. Nationally, the rate of regular

alcohol use by 16 and 17 year-olds is about the same. Why? Because it is legal and available. If we want marijuana to look like alcohol we should very much be prepared to see our teen population using more marijuana if it is legalized — just like alcohol.

Here's the bottom line: For Arizona to legalize recreational and retail marijuana is to upend decades and decades of concerted efforts to curb substance abuse and addiction in our health care community, our education community, our law enforcement community, our social work community, and practically everywhere else. If we are going to engage in such a radical change of all those years of work by all those institutions, the side that wants us to experiment like this with our children owes us a lot more information, such as the true costs as well as the true revenue. They are simply not providing it; it's all guesswork. It's all guesswork by them on behalf of a radical change.

At the end of the day, every Arizonan should be haunted by the recent quote on "60 Minutes" from Andrew Freedman, the Colorado director of marijuana policy coordination. "I do worry about if we are irreparably harming Colorado—and it will take years to suss out."

Who, in their right mind, would want that worry in Arizona?