

My Turn: Why Bernie Sanders is wrong about legal pot

By Ed Gogek

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Doctor: The Democratic presidential candidate can't have it both ways: Free health care and legal marijuana simply don't go together.

During last week's Democratic debate, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders said the United States should model its social policies on Sweden, Norway and Denmark — countries that provide free health care, free college and paid family leave.

But by saying he'd vote to legalize marijuana, Sanders made it much harder to convince Americans to adopt these programs.

Swedish history shows why.

In the 1970s, Sweden did what we're doing now: told police to ignore drug possession and only pursue serious crime. But drug abuse soared, so the country reversed course. Today, Sweden and its neighbors have some of the world's toughest drug laws, including tough marijuana laws.

None of the Scandinavian countries have decriminalized marijuana. Nor do they permit its medical use. An 84-acre autonomous district in Copenhagen is allowed to flout marijuana laws, but the rest of Denmark enforces them strictly.

This doesn't mean jailing drug users. Sweden uses the *threat* of jail to get substance abusers into treatment, and because crime is mostly caused by substance abuse, this policy prevents crime — so well that over the past decade the country has closed four prisons.

Tough marijuana laws also help keep Swedish socialism affordable, and that's why supporting legalization is a problem for Sanders. People already worry about what his programs would cost.

For example, a Rand Corporation report says California spends \$110 million yearly on schizophrenia hospitalizations caused by marijuana; for the whole U.S., that's over \$1 billion per year. Marijuana also causes addiction and injuries from auto accidents, which are expensive problems to treat.

How can Sanders ask America to pay for free health care if he's promoting a marijuana policy that would make health care more expensive?

Research on postal employees, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1990, found that marijuana users had more disciplinary problems, more absenteeism and higher

turnover. A 2012 study showed that marijuana users have less commitment to work. One company already left Colorado, citing employees who were too stoned to be productive.

Sanders wants the U.S. to require paid family leave and a high minimum wage. But if at the same time we legalize a drug that causes poor work performance, it could bankrupt businesses.

A University of Maryland study found that college students who used marijuana, even occasionally, studied less, skipped more classes, earned lower grades and were less likely to graduate. How can Sanders ask America to pay for free college, and then promote a drug policy that leads students to waste the experience?

Sanders deserves credit for promoting policies that would give American families the same financial security citizens in other rich countries enjoy. The Scandinavian programs he supports — free health care, free college, a living wage, good pensions and family leave — would greatly benefit most Americans.

However, it's hard to take seriously someone who would also increase the cost of these programs unnecessarily. By endorsing marijuana legalization, Bernie Sanders has made himself a less convincing salesman for the ideas he cares about most.

Dr. Ed Gogek of Prescott is an addiction psychiatrist and author of "Marijuana Debunked: A handbook for parents, pundits and politicians who want to know the case against legalization."