

Colorado's troubles with pot

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Cnn.com | July 10, 2014

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(CNN) -- This week, Washington state opened recreational marijuana stores for the first time. And these stores don't just carry your father's kind of weed. In addition to highly potent cigarettes -- which are much stronger than those some people might remember from Woodstock -- stores will also soon sell super-strength, pot-infused cookies, candies, sodas, vapor and wax concentrates.

Time will tell what the effects will be, but the state is not the first place to implement such a policy. Colorado started to sell marijuana six months ago. When President Barack Obama stopped by a Denver bar on Tuesday night, it comes as no surprise that someone offered him weed.

Colorado's experience with pot legalization can hardly be called a success. In fact, it should be considered a warning for the residents of Washington.

Special-interest "Big Tobacco"-like groups and businesses have ensured that marijuana is widely promoted, advertised and commercialized in Colorado. As a result, calls to poison centers have skyrocketed, incidents involving kids going to school with marijuana candy and vaporizers seem more common, and explosions involving butane hash oil extraction have risen. Employers are reporting more workplace incidents involving marijuana use, and deaths have been attributed to ingesting marijuana cookies and food items.

So much for the old notion that "pot doesn't kill."

Marijuana companies, like their predecessors in the tobacco industry, are determined to keep lining their pockets.

Indeed, legalization has come down to one thing: money. And it's not money for the government -- Colorado has only raised a third of the amount of tax revenue they have projected -- it's money for this new industry and its shareholders.

Open Colorado newspapers and magazines on any given day and you will find pages of marijuana advertisements, coupons and cartoons promoting greater and greater highs. The marijuana industry is making attractive a wide selection of marijuana-related products such as candies, sodas, ice cream and cartoon-themed paraphernalia and vaporizers, which are undoubtedly appealing to children and teens.

As Al Bronstein, medical director of the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Center recently said, "We're seeing hallucinations, they become sick to their stomachs, they throw up, they become dizzy and very anxious." Bronstein reported that in 2013, there were 126 calls concerning adverse reactions to marijuana. From January to April this year, the center receive 65 calls.

And, since Colorado expanded marijuana stores for medical users, peer-reviewed research has found a major upsurge in stoned driving-related deaths (that is not surprising since marijuana intoxication doubles the risk of a car crash).

It is little wonder that every major public health association, including the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the American Society of Addiction Medicine oppose the legalization of marijuana.

The scientific verdict is that marijuana can be addictive and dangerous.

Despite denials by special interest groups and marijuana businesses, the drug's addictiveness is not debatable: 1 in 6 kids who ever try marijuana will become addicted to the drug, according to the National Institutes of Health. Many baby boomers have a hard time understanding this simply because today's marijuana can be so much stronger than the marijuana of the past.

In fact, more than 450,000 incidents of emergency room admissions related to marijuana occur every year, and heavy marijuana use in adolescence is connected to an 8-point reduction of IQ later in life, irrespective of alcohol use.

As if our national mental illness crisis needed more fuel, marijuana users also have a six times higher risk of schizophrenia and are significantly more likely to development other psychotic illnesses. It is no wonder that health groups such as the National Alliance of Mental Illness are increasingly concerned about marijuana use and legalization.

That does not mean we need to arrest our way out of a marijuana problem.

We should reform criminal justice practices and emphasize prevention, early intervention and treatment when necessary. But we do not need to legalize -- and thus commercialize and advertise -- marijuana to implement these reforms.

The only people better off under legalization are the big companies that stand to profit from sales of marijuana. And we can be sure they will get even richer while public health and safety suffers.