HEALTH EFFECTS OF MARIJUANA

To the Editor:

I read the article from the September issue by Durkin (2014) entitled, “Legalization of Marijuana for Non-Medical Use: Health, Policy, Socioeconomic, and Nursing Implications.” The article commendably demonstrates the public concern of the effects that marijuana may have on adolescents, along with the evidence to support the clear economic proliferation in states that have legalized its use. Demand for its alternate forms of consumption, especially edibles, exceeded the supply by weeks, leaving the market in widespread production. There is also evidence in this article to support that the legalization of this drug in recreational form has increased the number of job opportunities, mainly in terms of production and distribution, as well as products that may accompany its consumption, in Colorado and Washington.

This article also clearly explains what Durkin (2014) believes to be health risks that should defer the public from using marijuana in a recreational fashion. However, two particular health implications that were stated have not been supported in outside research.

The article presents a disturbance in mental health, specifically depression, associated with the use of marijuana. Although many may believe this disturbance in mental health is valid, a study on addictive behaviors conducted by the University of Southern California and State University of New York Albany in 2005 with 4,400 participants found that “those who consume marijuana occasionally or even daily have lower levels of depressive symptoms than those who have never tried marijuana… [and] weekly users had less depressed mood, more positive affect, and fewer somatic complaints than non-users” (Smith, 2012, para. 14). This study could broaden attitudes on the effects of marijuana use, especially when attributed to the association of mental health disturbances.

Another health implication presented in the article by Durkin (2014) is that “chronic use of marijuana can lead to…damage to the trachea and bronchi” (p. 23). The specific damage indicated in the article is unclear; nonetheless, a large study in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 2012 may convince readers otherwise (“The times they are a-changin’,” 2014). They found that one joint per day for 7 years, which is commonly seen as moderate use, had not significantly impaired participants’ lung function. They also found no evidence that marijuana alone could lead to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, unlike cigarettes (“The times they are a-changin’,” 2014). Although Durkin (2014) presents possible health consequences from the use of recreational marijuana, there are limitations in the presentation that exclude possible health benefits of the drug.

In conclusion, educating the general public on the harmful and beneficial health effects of marijuana for non-medical use can provide a proper benchmark to form opinions on the implications of this drug. The unprecedented nature of the legalization of recreational marijuana in Colorado and Washington leaves unanswered questions of repercussions. Further study is needed to capture the impact this change in state law may reveal, but proper education on the correlations of marijuana and its health capabilities are imperative.

REFERENCES


Response:
I appreciate the reader’s interest in this important topic. As I noted, the issue of marijuana legalization is controversial, and the reader’s comments affirm this point. The use of marijuana for medical reasons was not disputed in the original article. The article was intended to provide nurses and other health care providers with an overview of key implications related to the landmark legalization of marijuana for recreational use.

Unfortunately, the reader cites secondary sources that do not include complete references. However, I reviewed what I believe are the primary sources for the cited material. Denson and Earleywine (2006) found that marijuana use by adults does not appear to increase the risk for depression; the authors acknowledged that the Marijuana Policy Project provided funding for this study. Regarding the effect of marijuana use on pulmonary function, Pletcher et al. (2012) found no association between modest levels of use and impaired function. They offered various explanations for this finding, including a possible “training effect” that may enable marijuana smokers to more completely fill their lungs during inspiration (Pletcher et al., 2012, p. 180).

The reader emphasizes the value of education regarding the health effects of non-medical marijuana use. I agree that educating oneself and others is critical. I strongly encourage nurses and other health care providers to pursue the abundant literature addressing the effects of marijuana use on health.

The reader appears to have concluded, based on the two cited sources, that marijuana positively affects mental health, and that it has a neutral effect on pulmonary health. I believe a broader investigation of the literature would likely lead to different conclusions. A rigorous meta-analysis suggests marijuana use may be associated with an increased risk for depression (Lev-Ran et al., 2014). Joshi, Joshi, and Bartter (2014) reviewed current research regarding the respiratory effects of smoking marijuana. They noted the findings reported by Pletcher et al. (2012); however, they also reported marijuana smoking is linked to a number of respiratory symptoms and advised against recreational use. A patient information sheet available from the American Thoracic Society demonstrates that patients should be alerted about marijuana’s potential to negatively affect pulmonary health (Drake & Slatore, 2013).

There is no question that various studies can result in conflicting findings. However, given the plethora of literature revealing marijuana’s potential to adversely affect health, I do not believe current evidence would support the practice of teaching patients or the public that non-medical use of marijuana offers health benefits.

REFERENCES

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