

Federal Marijuana Legalization by Elias Truitt

The use of the marijuana and hemp plants have been documented for multiple centuries and have been utilized by many different cultures. However, for many decades the use of the plant as a drug or medicine has been outlawed without much discussion until the last decade. In the past ten years we have seen great strides in the effort to legalize medical and recreational marijuana. While there still remain many who believe that marijuana is simply too dangerous for public consumption, supporters of this movement have been trying for over half a century to get these issues up to federal lawmakers but only recently have been given the time of day. I believe marijuana should be federally legalized in all states, medical and recreational, because it has been proven to have medical benefits, both physical and mental, along with being an economically fruitful business and its prohibition being the result of outdated, racist lawmaking.

Since the early 20th century, medical professionals and civilians have appraised marijuana for its potential health benefits, some of which have made a clear difference in the lives of people with certain debilitating diseases. Some of the most notable of these being diseases like Parkinson's and epilepsy. These afflictions affect the body's nervous system in a way that inhibits its ability to control movement, specifically in the extremities. Another disease which has seen big strides in the studies of medical marijuana treatment is cancer. The 2018 documentary *Weed The People* follows the lives of several pediatric cancer patients and their parents testing the potential cancer treating properties of marijuana, along with the dedicated doctors that have spent most of their lives fighting for the ability and the right to legally prescribe cannabis throughout the country.

One of these doctors is Dr. Bonni Goldstein, a pediatric cannabis physician. Her studies and findings, along with years of research and collaboration, have led her to find multiple examples of how marijuana can affect the brain in a very important way. “What we’ve discovered is that there’s a part of that system (brain) that is governed by cannabinoid compounds. These are molecules that we have that bind to these specific receptors and they seem to play a role in smoothing out the whole communication process.” In short, this means that the human brain has specific areas that respond to the chemical properties of marijuana, THC and CBD. These chemicals communicate with our brains in a therapeutic way, clearing away our neurological pathways for more thorough communication with the body. Countries like Israel have had federally prescribed medicinal marijuana since the 1960’s so they’ve been able to do more in depth studies on the direct effects of marijuana against cancer cells. Tests on mice have revealed a process called “Apoptosis” that occurs in cancer cells when created with certain cannabis chemicals, as explained by Dr. David Meiri, a cancer biologist. These findings have shown that the chemicals in marijuana react differently with cancer cells than normal human cells. “Every cell in our body has, like, a checkpoint, that they are checking if there is a problem. If there is a problem, they will kill themselves. What we see with cannabis is that it gives this ability back to the cancer cells.” These suicidal cancer cells are a mutation caused by cannabis cells, turning the cancer back on itself. When tested on mice, this proved true, as the cancerous mice treated with cannabis consistently saw reduced mass in tumor size.

In this documentary we also meet Sophie, a nine month old baby with brain cancer. With the help of Dr. Bonni Goldstein and cannabis specialist and distributor Mara Gordon, Sophie’s parents used small doses of concentrated cannabis oil along with chemotherapy, and the results

were astounding. The tumours in Sophie’s brain shrunk by half the size within weeks, leading her doctors to believe the chemotherapy was not solely responsible for the reduced tumour size. Sophie was eventually able to finish her chemo with continued reduction in tumor size, and has continued her medical cannabis regime. In a recent study from the US National Library of Medicine, it’s also been discovered that marijuana could also have benefits in more minor disease and pain treatment. “Control of nausea and vomiting and the promotion of weight gain in chronic inanition are already licensed uses of oral THC (dronabinol capsules). Recent research indicates that cannabis may also be effective in the treatment of painful peripheral neuropathy and muscle spasticity from conditions such as multiple sclerosis.” These studies are the key in helping patients get out of hospitals quicker and managing pain without the need for harmful pain medication, especially with children.

Weed The People also follows the lives of AJ Kephart and Chico Smith, two teenagers going through chemotherapy. Chico suffers from “the worst case of chemo-induced nausea they have seen” as explained by his mother Angela, and AJ has been prescribed upwards of ten hospital strength painkillers a day so cope with pain and loss of appetite due to chemotherapy. With the use of a very small amount of concentrated marijuana taken orally, AJ was able to narrow down his long list of pain pills in four days, taking only one Oxycodone pill a day. Chico, however, was not as lucky, developing a dependency on the opioids given to him by the hospital. Out of options, his mother turned to marijuana, having to travel out of state to California to legally purchase the medicine. Chico was able to use cannabis oil to quickly shake his opioid dependency and both AJ and Chico were later found to be cancer free. Chico is later quoted saying he wants to dedicate his life to producing medical marijuana for pediatric cancer patients,

“I’m writing a letter to the President to help legalize cannabis oil for kids so they don’t have to go through what I went through. I don’t get why they can’t get it if it really helps them.” Doctors and scientists all over the world are wondering the same thing.

While it has been found that every person may react to marijuana differently, the positive effects are there to see and it is concerning to see how many patients and families could be missing out on life saving treatments. Dr. Goldstein is later quoted at a national medical marijuana conference at Harvard, “I think it’s really important to understand that to a family that’s suffering, it feels like a miracle, but really it’s just science, and there’s no reason to be afraid of it and there’s no reason that this is not an option for everyone. My patients are getting better. My patients have better quality of life. It is imperative that the rest of the country follow California.” Without the proper laws in place, America will simply be unable to have the proper and necessary clinical research needed for more patients to be able to seek medical marijuana treatment. With continually positive results, both in major diseases and pain treatment, the Government is obligated to allow these patients a way to safely and legally treat themselves, along with allowing scientists to conduct federally funded research that will allow doctors to prescribe appropriate doses and potentially save lives.

The use of medical marijuana has been legal on a state by state basis in America since the late 1990’s, but only in the last decade have we seen marijuana enter into the conversation of federal legalization, seeing Colorado be the first state to legalize recreational marijuana in 2012. Since then, the Colorado state economy has seen a major boom in direct correlation with the legalization of marijuana. Recreational marijuana is heavily taxed, meaning that it is actively helping the economy the more it is sold. In the U.S. News article “Recreational Marijuana May

Be Big Business for States,” author Zoe Chevalier reports that Colorado “reported \$247,368,473 in tax revenues from marijuana sales for the year 2017.” The legalization of recreational marijuana use has also created over 40,000 new jobs in Colorado, and has also led to the creation of the Marijuana Cash Fund Program. Chevalier elaborates, “According to the Colorado Department of Revenue, \$40 million from the retail marijuana excise tax has been distributed to the Marijuana Cash Fund Program, which works to fund capital construction projects for public schools, and the rest was transferred to the state's public school fund.” This program was formed by the creation of the Colorado Amendment 64: The Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol Act of 2012, which required the initial sales of recreational marijuana to be put towards public schooling throughout the state. Programs like this are incredibly important examples of how the government can use the legalization of medical and recreational marijuana and put those profits directly back into the community.

As told in *Culture Wars in America: an Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, “Some studies have suggested that the federal and state governments could save up to \$1 billion annually in enforcement costs by legalizing marijuana while raising billions in revenues by taxing it.” Other states like Washington and California have followed suit, and have found similar benefits to the economy directly affected by the legalization of marijuana. If federally legalized, recreational marijuana could make a huge difference in the US economy and potentially create one of the most lucrative businesses in the country, not only for growers and dispensaries, but for the country as a whole.

The anti-marijuana laws in America have often been compared to the prohibition laws introduced in the 1920's. These laws made the consumption and distribution of alcohol illegal in

the United States, and gave way to one of the most notable increases in black market dealing and illegal bartering in the early 20th century. Secret bars and clubs were opened as a way for citizens to drink in secret, and a large portion of society were vehemently against these new rules. This also had an adverse effect on the federal economy and partially contributed to the Great Depression because of the loss of taxes on alcohol. These laws were later repealed in 1933 with the ratification of the 21st Amendment, and the sale and consumption of alcohol has continued to be legal ever since. Marijuana activists have continually argued that alcohol is far more dangerous to the American population than marijuana, yet it has stayed legal for nearly a century while marijuana continues to be federally illegal. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, over 88,000 people die every year from alcohol related illness or accidents making it one of the deadliest substances in America. Considering the proven dangers of alcohol and lack of any evidence of medical benefits, marijuana should not be a federally illegal substance while alcohol is sold in every grocery store in America.

Tobacco products have an even deadlier track record, the CDC reporting over 480,000 deaths per year, yet they continue to be legal for all adults to purchase. Statistically marijuana is far less dangerous than either of these fully legal products, therefore its demonization in the media and prohibition by the government cannot be justified simply because of its minor negative effects. If the government is willing to tax and make money from deadly substances like alcohol and tobacco, then legalizing and taxing recreational marijuana should make a positive difference for both the government and the users.

Along with the economic difference made by legalizing marijuana, there are some deeper social issues that trace back to the prohibition of marijuana. In the book, *Marijuana:*

Mind-Altering Weed, author E.J. Sanna details how marijuana was initially introduced to America. The first cases of marijuana being brought to America was through Mexico, however, it was actually the mormon church who were responsible for the first laws against the use of marijuana. Mormon's would bring back marijuana from their missions in Mexico to Salt Lake City, causing the church doctrine and subsequently the law of Utah to ban marijuana. Many other states then followed suit, sighting Mexico's drug problems as the main cause. A Texas state senator at the time was quoted as saying "All Mexicans are crazy, and this stuff [marijuana] is what makes them crazy." In eastern states, the presence of marijuana was also blamed on the African American population because of its popularity in the Jazz music scene. In 1934, an eastern newspaper editorialized "Marijuana influences Negroes to look at white people in the eye, step on white men's shadows and look at a white woman twice." These outdated and bigoted views are often pointed to as the cause of the demonization of marijuana in the United States. Many of the marijuana laws put into place during the early 20th century are still standing today, and I feel it is embarrassing to America as a country that we still adhere to these laws that were established based on the fear and ignorance felt by many of the country's leaders at the time.

Historians have also argued that the war on drugs, and specifically on marijuana, in America is responsible for the large amount of arrests and imprisonment of minorities in the United States. During the presidency of Richard Nixon, many new laws were put in place to begin what would be known as 'the war on drugs,' labeling all illegal drug users and dealers as "public enemy number 1." In the documentary *13th*, it is explained how these new laws were specifically targeting minorities in an effort to jail them and have them working for far less pay than they would make outside of the prison system, along with generally furthering the spread of

the anti-civil rights movements that were happening at the time.. One of Nixon's advisors is quoted as saying "The Nixon campaign in 1968 and the Nixon White House after that had two enemies: the anti war left and black people." These laws were expanded on in the coming decades by President Reagan and President Clinton.

To this day, there are hundreds of thousands of minority citizens currently imprisoned for non-violent drug offenses, even in states where medical and recreational marijuana has been legalized. Although there have been small strides in the freeing of many of these non-violent offenders, there are still many wrongfully imprisoned citizens whose crimes have become void by the marijuana laws currently in place. If recreational marijuana was federally legalized, this would make a big difference in our justice system, freeing hundreds of thousands of non-violent inmates. This would not only allow these people to come home and have more prosperous life opportunities, but would also make a difference to the American Tax-payer, lowering the amount of inmates in our prison systems, each prisoner costing the tax-payers thousands of dollars to house and feed every year.

While the medical benefits of marijuana have been strongly argued, there are still many who believe that the negative effects of marijuana outweigh the positives. The most obvious issue is the marijuana smoke. All types of second-hand smoke can be dangerous, including marijuana, and similarly to cigarettes, lighting anything on fire and breathing it in can have harmful effects on the lungs. A study by the American Board of Family Medicine goes into detail about some of the other noted side effects of marijuana use. "Substantial concerns remain about marijuana's adverse effects. Acute effects of marijuana use include sedation, dizziness, anxiety, and psychosis. Nine percent of users develop dependence, including impaired control

over use, difficulty stopping marijuana use despite its harms, and development of a withdrawal syndrome when use is discontinued.” These adverse effects are not to be taken lightly, but it’s important to note that these side effects are very similar to side effects of most of the leading pharmaceutical drugs used for the same purposes as medicinal marijuana.

Luckily, with the further development of the technology involved with growing and creating marijuana, there have been multiple other ways designed for patients to consume marijuana without having to smoke it. The most popular of these are known as “edibles,” in which marijuana is cooked into different foods or drinks. These products are in line with FDA guidelines, and provide all of the same effects and benefits of marijuana without the need to inhale smoke and put one’s lungs at risk. Other examples of “smokeless” marijuana include lotions, creams, and tinctures, all of which involve concentrating the base chemicals of marijuana into a paste, and is consumed by rubbing on the skin to enter the bloodstream. Scientists have also developed ways to vaporize marijuana similarly to nicotine in electronic cigarettes. While this technique is relatively new and has not been subject to long term testing, it has been shown to be far less harmful than actual smoke in the short term. All of these new options for consuming marijuana have greatly lowered the health risk involved by removing the need to inhale actual smoke while still offering all of the same benefits of raw marijuana flowers.

In either instance, it is important that we are able to receive more federally funded research in order to find all of the positive and negative effects that marijuana can have on the body. In the American Board of Family Medicine’s study they also interview several medical professors and students on how they feel about how medical marijuana is treated in the medical education system. “80% agreed that training should be incorporated into medical school

curricula, and 82% felt it should be a part of family medicine residency curricula; 92% agreed that continuing medical education (CME) about medical marijuana should be made available to primary care physicians, and 81% agreed that physicians should be required to have formal training about medical marijuana before recommending it to patients.” While there have never been any reported deaths from marijuana alone, it’s important to know there are risks as with any other drug. Lung disease, dependency, and mental health risks are all present with the use of medical marijuana, but with more research and professional studies, we can learn even more about how to enhance and change how marijuana is grown and manufactured to make the possible risk even lower.

As it stands, marijuana is only recreationally legal in 10 of the United States, with 22 other states abiding by limited medical marijuana laws. These laws inhibit the potential of high level testing and experimentation that would reveal information about the potential risks and benefits of marijuana to both the skeptics and the supporters. There are hundreds of thousands of patients that could potentially benefit from the use of medicinal marijuana, along with thousands of Americans that could benefit from the tax revenue acquired by legal marijuana sales. After over 70 years of legal disputes, propaganda, and a lack of professional research, the time has come to move past America’s old views and look forward to the future of modern medicine and business. The proven medical benefits and economic potential of marijuana, along with the racially intolerant laws that prohibit marijuana use, are perfect examples about how America is missing out on a golden opportunity sitting right under its nose. Updating these laws and regulations will allow America to move medically, socially, and economically toward a better future.

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