

Feds' Myths About Medical Marijuana

Studies dispel arguments that passage of Prop. 215 led to increased teen drug use

By Marsha Rosenbaum

FOUR YEARS AGO, when Californians were about to vote on Proposition 215, the medical marijuana initiative, opponents predicted that if seriously ill patients were allowed to use marijuana, recreational use among young people would increase. Drug czar Barry McCaffrey warned: "Teens stop using drugs when they become aware of the risks involved. Sending them the wrong message that marijuana is medicine will cause drug use to skyrocket."

Last week, the Department of Health and Human Services released its annual National Household Survey on Drug Abuse. As a Californian and mother of a 16-year-old boy, I read with keen interest the data on teenage use of marijuana.

Here's what I learned. In 1999, just under 8 percent of the nation's 12- to 17-year-olds used marijuana regularly. In California, the percentage was identical. Despite the legalization of marijuana for medical purposes in the Golden State, in each subsequent year California teenagers have ranked about average compared to the rest of the country.

In 1997, the year after the initiative passed, almost 7 percent of California teenagers used marijuana regularly, compared with nearly 9 percent nationwide. And in 1998, there was not much difference, with just over 7 percent of California's 12- to 17-year-olds using marijuana regularly, compared with 8 percent of the nation's teenagers.

As it turns out, the sky did not fall, and the predicted spike in marijuana use among teenagers never materialized. But Californians would never know it, because we're not supposed to.

In 1997, immediately after the passage of the medical marijuana initiative, a study was commissioned by the federal govern-

ment's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to demonstrate the (presumably negative) implications of Proposition 215. But the results of that study indicated that although marijuana use rose among high school students in other parts of the country, use actually leveled off in California after passage of the initiative.

The report was suppressed, and according to its author, Professor Rodney Skager of the UCLA Graduate School of Education, "I wonder if (the report) will ever see the light of day. Two years have passed since delivery of the first draft. People in the sponsoring agency undoubtedly fear the consequences of release of the data. The findings are politically incorrect because federal propaganda about the medical marijuana initiative insisted that passage would send the wrong message to young people."

Indeed, young people are getting all kinds of "wrong messages" about marijuana. And many are confused, which is not surprising. As high school civics teachers lecture about democracy, students are witnessing a thwarting of "the will of the people" in the name of protecting them.

Last week, the Supreme Court weighed in. By a 7-to-1 vote, the court responded to an "emergency" request by the Department of Justice to prohibit the Oakland Cannabis Buyer's Cooperative from distributing marijuana to its (fewer than 20) medical necessity patients who are extremely, even terminally ill.

Evidently, the Clinton administration persuaded most Supreme Court justices that medicinal use by the sick and dying will result in compromising our ability to enforce our drug laws and marijuana-is-evil posture. The one dissenting voice was that of Justice John Paul Stevens, who said the government "has failed to demonstrate



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that the denial of necessary medicine to seriously ill and dying patients will advance the public interest or that the failure to enjoin the distribution of such medicine will impair the orderly enforcement of federal criminal statutes."

Justice Stevens is right. If the statistics collected by our government tell us anything, it is that there is no relationship whatsoever between providing medicine to sick people and erosion of our ability to enforce our drug laws.

Last year alone, some 700,000 individuals were arrested on marijuana charges (87 percent for simple possession) — more than any other year in our history, and more than any other country in the world. As for "the public interest," marijuana use in the

general population remained constant last year, if not in decline.

If any messages have been sent to young people, they are that our system of government does not reflect voters' decisions when those decisions are inconsistent with federal dogma. The reality is that medical marijuana, this small step toward rational drug policy, has not resulted in increased teenage drug use or in fewer arrests in the general population. What surely has increased among young people is cynicism and mistrust of our government's drug policy.

Marsha Rosenbaum, Ph.D., directs the San Francisco office of the Lindesmith Center-Drug Policy Foundation, www.drugpolicy.org, an institute based in New York.