

The Dope Problem in North Carolina

by Julian Sereno

Marijuana is now legal for recreational use in nine states and the District of Columbia, including the entire Pacific coast -- California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska. For medical use, it is legal in 30 states plus D.C. That means that pot is illegal in less than half the states.

Public opinion polls favoring pot have swung dramatically since Y2K. Now a growing majority of Americans favor legalization, 61 percent according to a Pew Research Center report released in January. In 2001 it was 31 percent.

Among the states where pot is legal are economic powerhouses: California, with 40 million inhabitants a 2.5 trillion dollar GDP, has by far the largest economy in the U.S. Washington, Colorado, and Massachusetts all boast robust high-tech economies.

Marijuana opponents have always argued that it is gateway drug to lethal forms of dope, such as cocaine, methamphetamine and heroin. U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions makes that very argument.

Medical marijuana, they claim, merely opens the door to recreational marijuana. In that they may be right. The states that legalized medical marijuana first are the same ones to legalize recreational marijuana first. That might be because they have the most experience with weed, and none of the dire predictions of the naysayers came true.

Business is booming in everywhere recreational marijuana is legal, without any increase in traffic accidents, crime or any other social pathologies.

North Carolina is among the minority 20 states where marijuana remains illegal. North Carolina has always been socially conservative. A recent Elon

University survey found 51 percent of N.C. voters oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational use, compared to 45 percent who support it. The same survey also found that whopping 80 percent of those asked approve of the legalization of marijuana for medical use.

Bills legalizing medical marijuana have been introduced in both chambers of the North Carolina Legislature this year, but they did not emerge from committee in either the House or Senate. The demographic group most opposed to marijuana legalization are older Republican men; and that's who has the power in North Carolina in Spring 2018.

They worry that any legal acceptance will lead to more widespread use, and then who knows what. Gateway drug and all that.

While our legislators are commendably concerned about the well being of the citizenry, they were asleep at the switch when the real killer -- opioids -- sauntered through the gateway in the finest legal and medical clothing money can buy.

There probably wasn't much the NC Legislature could have done. It was the U.S. Congress that accepted huge campaign contributions (read bribes) from Big Pharma and their lobbyists. It was they that turned a blind eye to the explosion in the prescribing of opiates, and subsequently in their manufacture. Widespread addiction has followed, and mortality rates have spiked.

It doesn't seem to matter whether or not a state has legalized medical or recreational marijuana or not, opioid addiction is everywhere.

More than 12,000 North Carolinians have died from opioid overdoses between 1999 and 2016. That's about three or four a day. In Chatham County, Sheriff Mike Roberson called it the number one law enforcement issue facing the county.

The real dope problem, in North Carolina and throughout the United States, are the dopes that hold elective office.

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