



Guest opinion: Legislature should consider repealing medical marijuana

By DAVID HOWARD

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As chairman of the House committee that has overseen the bulk of the medical marijuana bills this session, I have heard arguments from those who use it, those who abuse it and those who are most affected by it. After hours of testimony, one thing has become clear. Medical marijuana has become a billion-dollar industry that Montana can ill afford.

Our state currently has 28,362 medical marijuana users, a figure which has grown by more than 1,000 in the last month alone. Of those, less than 2 percent are over the age of 70, with the largest demographic falling between the ages of 21-30. Three-quarters of these individuals were issued cards for "severe or chronic" pain.

When Initiative 148 passed in 2004, it provided for the limited use of medical marijuana under close medical supervision by those with debilitating conditions. There can be no question that voters who supported legalizing medical marijuana were grossly misled by out-of-state special interests.

During a recent public hearing in my committee, one caregiver testified that in order to supply 6,000 patients with medical marijuana, the network he represented was legally allowed to possess up to six plants and one ounce of marijuana per patient. If a fully grown plant is capable of producing 21 ounces of marijuana per year, this means a caregiver can produce upwards of 126 ounces of marijuana per patient.

By comparison, a typical marijuana cigarette or joint has less than half a gram of marijuana and produces an effect that lasts a minimum of 2-4 hours. If an individual were to smoke six joints every day, they would consume less than 40 ounces of marijuana over the course of an entire year. This leaves 86 ounces of an unused drug that is currently valued at \$225 per ounce. Taken as a whole, this translates to \$540 million worth of excess and unaccounted for marijuana.

Testimony from local educators confirms that the illegal use of medical marijuana has begun to infiltrate our school system. Drug dispensaries are popping up next to schools while students with cards are selling marijuana to peers. Meanwhile, teachers from across the state are noticing an increase in the rate of dropouts of kids whose parents abuse medical marijuana.

Law enforcement officials are also struggling to combat the problems associated with the "legal" use of medical marijuana. On multiple occasions, caregivers have been caught attempting to sell the drug to undercover agents and falsifying card applications for patients that failed medical screenings. These problems are only compounded by the fact that nearly one out of every 10 Montanans on parole or probation currently carries a medical marijuana card. During one hearing, a narcotics officer stated that the market has become so oversaturated with the drug that the DEA has labeled Montana a "source country" for the illegal distribution and trafficking of marijuana outside the state.

There is no question that the use of medical marijuana in this state is being abused by those with recreational, profit-driven and even criminal motives. Unfortunately, they have done so at the expense of those with debilitating medical conditions. As legislators, we did not have a say in bringing this drug to Montana, but as citizens, we have a chance to prevent its proliferation from spiraling out of control. It is high time legislators start seriously considering whether a full repeal of this dangerous drug is in the best interests of the communities we were elected to represent.

Rep. David Howard, R-Park City, chairs the House Human Services Committee.