

THE DENVER POST

Editorial: Colorado should restrict the potency of marijuana concentrates, keep them away from teens

These concentrates must be regulated and kept out of Colorado schools

By **THE DENVER POST EDITORIAL BOARD** |

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Colorado doctors say they are seeing an alarming spike in patients suffering psychosis — a break from reality that comes with disorders like schizophrenia — especially in young patients using high-potency marijuana concentrates.

It's OK to be skeptical of that anecdote. We were too. After all, marijuana is a natural plant that has been used for centuries as a medicine and for fun. It gives users a mild, mostly benign, high from the compound Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol.

However, reading peer-reviewed research in top medical journals around the world has led us to conclude the risk of high-potency marijuana to Colorado's mental health is substantial. Marijuana must be regulated as any other harm-causing food, medicine or recreational drug. Products with high levels of caffeine are regulated for safety. Tobacco products come with warnings about cancer, and flavored cigarettes have long been banned. Grain alcohol like Everclear isn't sold in grocery stores or convenience stores for a reason.

And yet, a teen with a medical marijuana card is able to “loop purchase” — the act of going to several stores to purchase the maximum allowable amount multiple times — enough watermelon-flavored concentrate to have his or her entire senior class high for a week.

Chris Rogers, the medical director of child and adolescent services at The Medical Center of Aurora, has no doubt that high-potency marijuana concentrates are causing psychosis in the adolescent patients he treats.

“It has not been good for the kids of Colorado,” Rogers, the past-president of the Colorado Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Society, said. He said patients exhibit extreme paranoia and lose all touch with reality believing doctors and parents are out to get them or that food and water are poison. “There's no telling who comes back from this and who doesn't. It can be recurrent, and it tends to get worse.”

This isn't your grandma's joint. This new age remix of chemically isolated THC in a crystal-like or liquid substance — shatter, oil or wax — is heated with a butane torch or vape pen and inhaled. It's called dabbing. And the products contain 60% to 90% THC, generating a high described as mind-blowing in marijuana publications.

When Colorado voters approved the sale of marijuana for both medical and recreational use, many of us were sold on it being a holistic remedy for our aches, pains and anxiety. We still believe that is the case for many marijuana products on the market today.

But for a decade now peer-reviewed research in medical journals has been documenting the prevalence of marijuana use, particularly of these high-potency concentrates, among patients suffering psychosis. Studies in the Lancet Psychiatry, Neuropharmacology, Asian Journal of Psychiatry, American Journal of Psychiatry, The American Journal on Addictions and World Psychiatry, have explored the link.

There is some research suggesting that the link may be correlated and not causal – meaning those suffering from psychosis may be more likely to use cannabis and other drugs to self-medicate. But one study, in particular, found a higher rate of psychosis in cities with easy access to high-concentrate marijuana in addition to a high rate of concentrates use among those seeking treatment for psychosis.

Cannabis users need to know the risks. We learned from Big Tobacco the damage of waiting for scientifically proven causation.

Colorado lawmakers must take action this session. Legislation is being proposed that would cap the potency of marijuana products to something more reasonable like 30%, which is about the most that can be found in the actual non-refined flower product. Critically, the legislation also must create a shared computer system for tracking purchases across multiple stores to prevent looping. And we must find a way to ensure teens with medical marijuana cards are getting the drug they need for medical purposes and that's all.

We aren't calling for the recriminalization of these drugs — putting teens behind bars for selling a legal product to their friends would do more harm than good. But shutting down the pipeline to our schools is essential for public health and safety, and there are reasonable measures we can put in place to protect teens.

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