

Daily Camera

Guest opinion: Tim Howard and Rachel Friend: High-potency THC creates unforeseen crisis

By DAILY CAMERA GUEST OPINION | openforum@dailycamera.com | Boulder Daily Camera
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We have failed. As parents and elected officials, we have failed to provide the safeguards our kids and young adults deserve when it comes to the emergence of high-potency THC products. We acknowledge that we need to better regulate the dangerous extracted chemical products now found in dispensaries across the state.

In 2012, Coloradans passed Amendment 64, legalizing recreational marijuana. At the time, we did not imagine that marijuana (what we thought of as “Mary Jane” or “weed”) would lead to the introduction of a set of dangerous high-potency THC products.

THC is the component from cannabis that provides the “high.” THC can also rewire the brain in a way that builds tolerance and dependence to it. The introduction of high-potency THC products has caused the average THC percentage of products to rise from 6.7% in 2008 to 69.4% in concentrates in 2019, with Colorado dispensaries now offering products boasting 95% and 99% THC potency.

That’s right, you can buy high-potency THC products that are 95% pure or higher. These purified products are packaged as “shatter” and “wax,” suitable for breaking into pieces for melting in a “rig” with a butane torch. Regular use of high-potency THC products is four times more likely to result in Cannabis Use Disorder, which translates into greater risk of developing depression and suicidality in young adulthood.

Those most vulnerable to these outcomes are our high school teens and young adults. Why?

Their developing brains increase susceptibility. Without a fully developed prefrontal cortex, their executive functioning, including self-control and self-monitoring, are not fully developed, making them more likely to succumb to peer pressure and choose risky behavior.

Their still-developing brains are also more readily primed for triggering substance abuse and suffering long-term negative impacts such as psychosis and suicidality.

The absence of adequate controls regarding medical marijuana card issuance has likely contributed to thousands of cards issued to 18- to 20-year-olds. These young adults are at increased risk when they take the high-potency THC products, and also put others at risk when they share or sell to their often-younger peers.

The industry appears to be directly marketing to young consumers, using cute product names like “Scooby Snacks Shatter” and “Ice Cream Cake Flavor.” The generous interpretation is that this is an attempt to tap into a nostalgic connection with adult consumers. Call us cynical, but we believe the product naming is much more likely to be a reprise of Big Tobacco’s advertising choice to leverage “Joe Camel” and similar imagery to appeal to new young consumers — “get ‘em hooked early.”

The problem is right in front of us. How do we address it?

State legislators are drafting a bill with proposed measures to protect the public health from dangers posed by high-potency THC products, and we intend to support efforts to pass this legislation.

We want basic loopholes closed. We want to ensure that recommendations for medical marijuana are treated with the same care and accountability as other medical treatments.

We want coroners and the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment to collect toxicology data to better understand the impact of high-potency THC products.

We all should be following the science, and it compels us to acknowledge that high-potency THC products are not just “weed.” Like the state legislators moving this legislation forward, we believe Coloradans made the right choice back in 2012 to legalize marijuana.

But we all failed to foresee the need — and therefore failed to enact corresponding protections — concerning potency. Good leadership includes acknowledging when we’ve missed something, and making a course-correction that perfects the realization of the voters’ intent.

We are calling for capping THC potency to what is scientifically supported for medical uses and safe for recreational uses that better resembles the marijuana Coloradans voted to legalize, closing loopholes, and increasing data collection and research.

Join us.

Sources for this article came from the Washington State Social Development Research Group, Colorado Department of Revenue and Marijuana Enforcement Division, CDPHE, JAMA Psychiatry, the National Institutes of Health, Drug and Alcohol Review and Stanford University.

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