

Insight provided into legalization of marijuana issue

By David Lea

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With legalization of marijuana an issue in this year's federal election, local officials, candidates and others are speaking up to provide their insight.

Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau has had the most-publicized stance regarding marijuana, stating legalization would make it tougher for minors to buy and would take money away from organized crime. He proposes marijuana sales be strictly regulated and commits to work with the provinces to ensure it is done responsibly.

NDP Leader Tom Mulcair has said he supports the decriminalization of marijuana, but feels its health impacts require further examination and has not committed to its legalization.

The Green Party calls for its legalization and advocates taxation of marijuana and the creation of a regulatory framework for its safe production by small independent growers.

Meanwhile, the Conservative Party of Canada is against legalization of marijuana and the party leader Stephen Harper vows it will not happen under his government.

While Halton Region's Health Department declined to weigh in on the debate, it did provide information on the drug's health impacts.

The Region noted contrary to popular opinion, marijuana does have an addictive quality and heavy and/or prolonged use can lead to physical or psychological dependency.

They said users develop a tolerance to THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) and require higher doses more frequently to get the same effect. If chronic users of high doses of THC try to stop suddenly, they will have withdrawal symptoms.

The Region listed the short-term effects of marijuana use to include:

- altered perception of time, distance and space
- impaired judgment
- loss of coordination
- disorientation
- red eye
- dry mouth and throat
- increased appetite (the munchies)
- sleepiness
- racing heart rate
- panic attacks or feeling paranoid

The Region said the effects are worse when mixed with alcohol, and noted that if smoked frequently, regular use can:

- make it difficult for the user to concentrate
- reduce memory or attention span
- result in problems with school and work
- produce a psychological or physical dependence
- increase the risk of lung cancer
- worsen mental health issues such as depression and anxiety

While marijuana may have some negative

health impacts, for some it is an important pain relief option.

Ronan Levy is the director and general council for Canadian Cannabis Clinic, which provides assessments and referrals to patients so they can order medicinal marijuana.

Most patients seen at his clinics are those dealing with chronic pain.

Others include people living with MS (Multiple Sclerosis), Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease, anxiety and glaucoma.

Levy noted that while he does not take a strong political stance on the legalization of marijuana, he does believe it makes sense.

"There are many people who smoke pot at some point in their lives recreationally, I'd say a significant portion of the population. To criminalize something that a lot of people do anyway seems a little short-sighted," said Levy.

"It just puts people into jail and creates scenarios where worse outcomes are more likely than good outcomes. So, from an economic and societal perspective, I think there is a lot of merit to legalization."

Levy acknowledged there are risks associated with blanket legalization, but argued the benefits outweigh them. He said he is not worried about the impact legalization would have on his business as he expects any legalization process would probably follow the Colorado, U.S. model, which sees recreational marijuana taxed heavily and medicinal marijuana not taxed at all.

"What they saw in Colorado was the medicinal (marijuana) market actually tripled in size after recreational cannabis was legalized, in part because I think it just became more normalized," said Levy.

The local law enforcement community takes a dim view of legalization of marijuana.

Halton police spokesperson Sgt. Chantal Corner, said the Halton Regional Police Service, the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police all oppose legalization of marijuana.

"We understand the current process of sending simple drug possession cases to criminal court places a significant burden on the justice system and we clearly understand that enforcement alone is not a solution," said Corner.

"The Halton Regional Police supports the need to expand the range of enforcement options available and is committed, along with our partners, to looking for alternatives in assisting those living with addictions."

Corner said an example of this commitment is the Halton police partnership with the Halton Equitable Drug Strategy (HEDS).

HEDS is a municipal drug strategy, a collaborative plan to improve the health, safety and wellbeing of Halton residents by working together to reduce the harms associated with substance abuse.

Oakville resident M. B., (whose name has been withheld) is a college student and an every-

day marijuana smoker, who said he is conflicted about the potential legalization of the drug.

For the last six years, M.B. said he has been trying to kick his drug habit by participating in various local youth rehabilitation groups.

"It is a struggle... There is this urban legend people seem to firmly believe, I heard it in high school a lot, that marijuana isn't addictive," said M.B., adding, "Then you try to go two weeks without it."

"It's illegal, but why is it illegal? The two sides of the argument are very extreme and the truth

is somewhere in the middle. There needs to be more research because this could be a success and keep crime off the streets and bring in lots of money or it could start up an addictive lifestyle for a lot more people."

While marijuana is often referred to as a gateway drug, M.B. takes issue with that characterization. He argues the person that sells the marijuana, the dealer, is the gateway offering customers harder drugs in an effort to make more money.

M.B. said he is not sure legalization would change this dynamic.

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7:15 Sheridan
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