

## 2114 – Pot and repeating history

On this fifty year anniversary of the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health, I found myself reviewing articles for a special edition of the *West Virginia State Medical Journal* dedicated to this topic. At the same time, I came across a February 23, 2014 article by Peter Hecht from McClatchy-Tribune featured in the February 24, 2014 *Washington Post* entitled, "Medical marijuana dispensary takes on IRS over what it calls 'punitive tax'".

Instantly, I wondered if the same health and public policy discussion we are having about tobacco today, we will be have about pot in 2114 or much sooner. Did we not learn anything from history?

More people needlessly die or are disabled from use of tobacco today than any other substance. This is despite the marvelous progress that has been made in the last 50 years through various educational, medical and public policy initiatives. However, that progress has somewhat reached a plateau and many experts opine further progress will require cultural change.

The barriers or enemies of such change that are usually indicted include callous, profit seeking, corporations, i.e., "big tobacco" and government entities that refuse to spend what is required to change the culture, often even diverting "dedicated" tobacco funds to other uses, e.g., paving highways. The efforts of the anti-tobacco lobby and government regulatory agencies is said to be no match for the advertising might of "big tobacco" and "big government".

The real situation is much more complex. Tobacco did not begin as a product of big business or subject of government regulation, taxation and harm reduction funding. Its use began as a personal enjoyment and cultural practice with limited knowledge of its negative health consequences. When these health effects were verified, the role of big tobacco and big government were well ensconced; the discovery simply led to a more expansive and expensive role for big business and big government. These expanded roles - that divert millions of dollars of the people's resources to advertising, regulation, litigation, taxation, education and medical care for preventable conditions - would vanish if the prevailing culture strongly condemned tobacco use.

Various reasons, e.g., personal freedom, are advanced as to why the use of tobacco will – or should - be allowed to continue but most will agree that the vested interests of big tobacco and big government play a role in promoting its continued use.

What has led to the recent cultural change supporting legalizing or otherwise expanding the supply of pot for increased recreational and other use I do not understand. (I do understand initiatives to decriminalize simple possession and use of pot.) Unlike the early years of tobacco,

it already has been established as a dangerous substance with serious negative medical consequences. It is likely expanded research will uncover even more medical harm. Why the public wants to invite “big business” and “big government” involvement I cannot comprehend. It will inevitably lead to the same waste of the people’s money on advertising, regulation, litigation, taxation, education and medical care for preventable conditions and make it even more difficult to convince folks to quit this harmful behavior.

What shocked me in the Peter Hecht article was how much big business and big government have already moved into the sale and taxation of an *illegal* substance. Canna Care dispensary is a non-profit, multi-million dollar a year, evangelical medical marijuana provider that mixes “buds with bibles”. The IRS litigation disallows \$2.6 million in expense deductions for three years, although it will allow a deduction for the cost of the illegal marijuana sold. Other providers, including a legitimate hospital, advise Canna Care to cut a deal with the IRS since it essentially is a “shake down” and they will settle for much less.

It does not take much imagination to realize the attractiveness of marketing and selling marijuana to *really* “big business” once it becomes legal and how big government will swoop in to get their tax cut - and eventually foster taxpayer funded programs and regulations to counter the negative health effects of pot.

Are we amnesic, insane, self-destructive and/or just stupid?

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