

## **Intoxicants and other substances – what drives public health policy?**

In the context of protecting and promoting the public's health, have you ever scratched your head and asked, why are they (authoritarian government) messing with regulating that substance or why don't they do something about that substance? Many folks do and are confused by the vast differences in opinions as to what they assumed was largely a scientific determination as how to best protect and promote a healthy public. It is not.

A few recent articles (and comments about them) discussed below elucidate that public health policy is set by social-political determinants where science usually plays a minor role. As a country, many of us like to get high, resist intrusion into our personal liberties and usually allow "money" to trump most other considerations.

One article was about alcohol and another cannabis vaping. Both addressed the alleged need for more government action to protect the health and safety of Americans. Neither article was particularly persuasive but unleashed a flurry of contradictory comments supporting or attacking the authors and other commenters based upon alleged public health, monetary, and ideological facts and theories.

The first, "How Legal Weed Shops Feed the Vaping Crisis" in the January 20, 2020 "The Wall Street Journal" alleges that in at least one-third (probably more) of the recent EVALI lung disease outbreak cases, the offending agent did not come from the black market or dark alleys but state approved cannabis operations. The inference was those charged with protecting your health are engaged in practices that attack the public's health and they should be curtailed.

Numerous commentators reviewed the alleged serious negative health effects of cannabis, especially in youth, noting that states that have legalized cannabis experience a 25%-50% increase in youth use and that the cannabis available today is far stronger, and at times altered, than that available a few decades ago. They also note that the black market continues to flourish in states where it is legal.

Others claim cannabis is a natural substance used for centuries without side-effects. They claim it has positive medicinal value, is much safer than alcohol and avoid subjects such as "getting high" and DWI.

The second, was an Alex Berezow, January 15, 2020 article in the "American Council of Science and Health" newsletter dissecting and blasting a recent "The Atlantic" article, "The Atlantic is Nostalgic for the Anti-Alcohol Prohibition Era". "The Atlantic" avowed that alcohol is causing so much cancer and other morbidity and mortality we must enhance regulating it. Berezow countered that alcohol per se is safe, its limited use can promote longevity and compared to other substances, like various foodstuffs, relatively, it has a minor health impact.

Although most agreed that obesity and unhealthy foods by far exceed other factors in promoting poor health, they noted that alcohol is a huge contributor to poor health and

premature death because as a society a large portion of the country likes to get high (whether with alcohol or other substances).

As one commentator said, “ At some point society will have to own up that the interests of intoxication prevail over those of safety. By the time this happens we’ll be so drug-addled we won’t care.” Another commentator opined that major interest of states to legalize cannabis was to generate revenues since public health efforts to reduce tobacco use had worked and state tobacco tax revenues were dropping and had to be replaced.

As to foodstuffs, most Americans are not willing to yield to the states their personal liberty to eat and drink sugar, salt, fast foods and snack foods, even though the greatest health gains rest in this arena.

As public health advocates our major tools to protect and promote a healthy population remain education and promotion. Regulation (with the possible exception of certain environmental factors) will largely be determined by our love of getting high, exercising our personal liberties and filling government coffers.

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