



Policy Perspective - A Conversation with Seth Ammerman

Seth Ammerman is a Clinical Professor of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. Dr. Ammerman specializes in youth addiction medicine, and serves on the AAP's National Committee on Substance Abuse. Dr. Ammerman was a lead author on that Committee's 2015 Report, "The Impact of Marijuana Policies on Youth: Clinical, Research, and Legal Update."

What brought you to the issue of marijuana, and the work of the BRC?

I am first and foremost a pediatrician. I work with underserved youth - homeless, uninsured, at-risk kids - and they tend to have higher rates of substance abuse than the overall population of adolescents. These kids have difficult psychosocial circumstances and chaotic lives - substance abuse among them is a common thread. I was originally very involved with tobacco use prevention and cessation programs among underserved youth, and I helped start the AAP's Northern California Chapter Tobacco Use Task Force. That Task Force morphed into the Chapter Substance Abuse Committee, which I chair. It was clear that tobacco wasn't the only substance that kids were using, and abusing, and it made sense to focus on these issues together.

I began to focus on marijuana during my work on this committee. I became interested in what is going on in the world of marijuana use, following research and trends. I served as the lead author of the AAP's Updated Marijuana Policy Statement. I was so honored when the Blue Ribbon Commission invited me to serve - it's vitally important to have a pediatrician's input, since this drug touches the lives of many adolescents.

You've written about the harmful effects of tobacco marketing on teenagers. Tell me what you have learned about how marketing affects teen tobacco use.

The bottom line is that the big tobacco companies need young people to stay in business. Their product kills hundreds of thousands of people a year, and they need to replace those users in order to make money. There is no better market than young people - they *have* to market to them. Of course, they claim they don't, but we all know they do. They know the science behind addiction, which shows that the brain is primed to become addicted during the teen years. If they waited to advertise to a market that is twenty one and over, they wouldn't get nearly the addiction rates and use rates that we see.

The latest marketing efforts of tobacco companies have been around e-cigarettes. Usage of e-cigs is way up among teens - it's working. There are plenty of rules and regulations around targeting youth in advertising tobacco, but the industry has essentially been able to work around

them. E-cigarettes could be their number one product in the next decade, and they are banking on it to stay in business - they need kids to do that.

The biggest thing to keep in mind is that marketing matters - everyone is susceptible to it, but youth are especially vulnerable.

Do you think Big Tobacco will get involved in the marijuana business, if it is legalized?

I don't know - they certainly have the infrastructure, and they are poised to enter the market. But I think the same could be said for the alcohol industry.

Speaking of alcohol, are there some lessons that we can learn from the way that industry markets to young people?

In general, the alcohol industry has been a more responsible player than the tobacco industry. They tend to follow the spirit of the advertising restrictions more; they are in some ways more sensitive to their public image than Big Tobacco. In some respects, the danger of drinking too much alcohol is better known, even among teens. They all know someone who has done something stupid when they were drunk - they know about the short term risks. The alcohol industry is able to advertise responsible use, something the tobacco companies can't do.

As I mentioned before, the alcohol industry could be in a good position to enter the marijuana market. It used to see marijuana as a competitor, but that assumption is changing. We may also be able to look at how alcohol is delivered and apply some of those lessons to legal marijuana.

Alcohol also has a unique delivery model with bars, which restrict entry to adults over the age of 21. Restrictions on locations serving marijuana may be difficult to enforce, however, because it is so much easier to conceal. What might be useful is a marijuana "bar" model that requires membership, which can be revoked if a member has been caught selling to kids or other misuse. It would provide an incentive to follow the rules.

If California makes marijuana legal, do you think companies that produce or sell marijuana will market it in a way that encourages abuse by young people? How do we prevent that?

That is definitely possible, and even likely. The marijuana industry, like all businesses, needs to make money, and young people are an important market. There are some lessons we can learn from tobacco regulation, however, that will help curb use among young people.

First, pricing is important. Teens are price sensitive. When tobacco prices go up, smoking among young people goes down. We have to be careful not to price it too high, otherwise the black market will flourish, and that increases access for young people.

Second, strict advertising rules and sales regulations can limit youth use. Regulations that ban ads targeted directly at young people and products that are attractive to youth, like candy, flavors, etc.; limits on retail outlet locations and hours - not near parks, schools, youth centers, etc.; and strict enforcement of ID checks have been proven to reduce tobacco use among kids - we can do the same for marijuana.

I have two young children myself, and I worry about how they might access marijuana if it were legal. If marijuana is legal in California, how do we keep it out of the hands of kids?

The best thing that parents can do to keep their kids from abusing drugs is act as good role models for them. That means not consuming marijuana in front of your kids.

The prevailing attitude among adults in California is that marijuana is a fairly benign substance. That may be true for responsible adult use, but it's different for kids. Teens are more at risk for developing problem use, and kids who are regular (10-19 times per month) or heavy (20 or more times per month) users are at high risks for substance use disorder. This can have negative long term effects.

Parents who use marijuana in front of small children or teens are giving the kids the message that it's not harmful, regardless of what they say about the drug's harms to kids. We need to get that message out to adults that they should not use marijuana in front of children or teens.

What do you think is the most important issue that the public and policy makers need to think about before legalizing marijuana in California?

We need to make sure that we protect the health and potential of our kids. The best way to do that is to develop and fund student assistance programs, based in schools, which help kids who are having problems with drugs and alcohol get the services they need to stay in school and on track. For those kids not in school, there are also excellent programs that focus on life skills training, getting back into school, and learning a vocation.

If we legalize and tax marijuana, it could raise a lot of money for the state. What will the state do with it? If we want to protect our kids, we need to make these programs a priority and allocate funding for them from the onset. Politicians often talk about protecting kids without actually funding the programs they need. We have a chance to direct a large tax windfall toward something that really matters and can help significant numbers of kids.