

NordAN resolution 2019:

Pushing back against the normalization of cannabis

Despite growing knowledge about cannabis related harm, attitudes towards the drug seem to be shifting in a more liberal direction. Cannabis use is perceived to be more acceptable and less harmful. Many countries have allowed medical use of cannabis, and some countries and jurisdictions have even legalized recreational use.

Broken promises

A key promise of legalization is that it will curb the black market. However, this has not been the case in the jurisdictions where it has been implemented. Instead, law enforcement say there is a thriving black market operating under cover of the legal market.

Legalization also promises responsible regulation of cannabis. However, regulating the cannabis market has turned out to be challenging, and the resources available are limited. Moreover, taxes and cost of regulation drive up the price of cannabis, thus creating incentives for a black market.

Cannabis legalization was sold to the public with promises of tax revenues for good causes. The tax revenues are real, however, they make up only a small fraction of public budgets. Furthermore, they don't take into account that increasing use comes with significant costs, e.g. traffic accidents, hospital and emergency room visits, treatment and policing.

Strong claims are made about the medical promises of cannabis. While studies suggest that cannabis can be effective for some conditions, the evidence so far is sparse. In many jurisdictions policies have outpaced the science. Medical use of cannabis must be guided by evidence, and cannabis-based medicines must be submitted to the same approval system as any other medicine.

A new addiction industry

Cannabis legalization gives birth to a new, legal cannabis industry that aims to maximize profits. Just like the alcohol and tobacco industry, the cannabis industry needs to expand its markets, recruit new generations of users and make cannabis a normal part of social culture.

Through marketing and product development it targets different segments of the market, including young people, heavy users and new user groups. Like the alcohol and tobacco industry, the cannabis industry relies on a small group of heavy users for much of its profits. Like the alcohol and tobacco industry, the cannabis industry seeks to shape research agendas and public discourse. And like the alcohol and tobacco industry, the cannabis industry seeks political influence to shape policies and regulations.

Public health concerns

The evidence base for cannabis related harm is growing. Mental health problems, addiction and traffic accidents are well documented. However, we don't yet know the full spectrum of harms from cannabis. New and more potent products, more intensive use and new methods of consumption makes much of what we know obsolete. Just in the past few years, issues such as cannabis hyperemesis and vaping related lung disease have emerged as new and unexpected public health threats.

Curbing the spread of legalization

So far, cannabis legalization has primarily been a North American phenomenon. However, we note with concern that the government of Luxembourg has promised to legalize cannabis, and the Dutch government has proposed licensed production to fill the demand of their semi-legal coffee shops. We fear that these policy reforms will spread to other countries at a time when the broken promises of legalization are becoming clearer and the evidence for harm is mounting.

We urge our governments to challenge the emerging legalization policies, and at the same time we urge researchers, NGOs, parents and concerned citizens to speak out against the normalization and legalization of another addictive substance.