

## The White House Returns to Stoking Fears About Potent Pot

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In what is becoming a nearly annual ritual, on June 12 the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy released yet another report filled with dire warnings about rising marijuana potency. And the U.S. media -- led by the Associated Press, by far the nation's most powerful wire service -- once again mistakenly treated the story as if it was actual news.

AP's story, picked up by newspapers and TV and radio stations all over the country, began, "Marijuana potency increased last year to the highest level in more than 30 years, posing greater health risks to people who may view the drug as harmless, according to a report released Thursday by the White House."

One had to read six paragraphs into the story to get the first hint of a dissenting view, voiced by Dr. Mitch Earleywine, author of the book, *Understanding Marijuana*. Earleywine, a substance abuse researcher and psychology professor at the Albany campus of the State University of New York, noted that marijuana smokers simply smoke less when the product is more potent, just as drinkers imbibe smaller quantities of bourbon or vodka than they do of beer. Since the only serious proven harm from marijuana use consists of coughing and other respiratory symptoms caused by inhalation of smoke, higher potency marijuana is arguably healthier, since smoke intake is reduced.

But the AP story -- and most other coverage -- was dominated by dark suggestions of the dire consequences of this new "potent pot." ONDCP chief John Walters warned of the "serious implications" of increased potency, saying, "Today's report makes it more important than ever that we get past outdated, anachronistic views of marijuana."

And Nora Volkow, head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, added, "Particularly worrisome is the possibility that the more potent THC might be more effective at triggering the changes in the brain that can lead to addiction."

The operative word in Volkow's statement is "might." The claim that higher-potency marijuana means greater risk of addiction is entirely speculative, supported by precisely zero data. That, too, was pointed out by Earleywine, but in a comment buried at the very end of the story.

And not acknowledged anywhere, either by AP or most other news outlets, is the very large body of evidence suggesting that the whole "it's not your father's marijuana" scare story is phony. To understand why, a bit of context -- almost never provided by U.S. mass media -- is necessary.

First, the average potency level of 9.6 percent THC that has ONDCP so alarmed (and which overstates the potency of most domestic marijuana, which is around 5 percent) is actually low by world standards. As reported in the new edition of *The Science of Marijuana*, by Oxford University pharmacologist Dr. Leslie Iversen, the average THC content of seized marijuana products in Britain from 1998 to 2005 ranged from 10.5 percent to 14.2 percent. In the Netherlands, where marijuana is available by prescription through conventional pharmacies, the minimum permissible THC content set in government standards for medical cannabis (except for one special variety developed specifically to be high in cannabinoids other than THC) is 13 percent.

In other words, the *minimum* acceptable THC content for medical marijuana in the Netherlands is over one-third higher than the level that has Walters and Volkow in such a tizzy.

And more sober analysts around the world continue to be far less certain than U.S. drug warriors that potency is of great consequence. In a report issued earlier this spring, the British government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (of which Iversen is a member) expressed some ambivalence about the issue. While acknowledging a concern about young people using high-THC marijuana, the ACMD noted that most users may simply smoke less. It also noted that while potency has clearly increased in the United Kingdom over time, "there has been no

concomitant reported increase in enquiries to the National Poisons Information Service nor an increase in hospital admissions due to cannabis intoxication."

A new analysis by a group of Australian researchers, published online May 20 by the journal *Addiction*, is even more skeptical, citing "claims about escalating cannabis potency made as far back as 1975." The Australians argue that "more research is needed to determine whether increased potency and contamination translates to harm for users." For good measure, they add that the evidence "is fragmented and fraught with methodological problems," explaining that the variations in marijuana samples (potency data comes from batches of marijuana seized by law enforcement) are so wide and the sources so varied that it is simply impossible to know if reported potency accurately represents what is available to marijuana consumers.

That said, there are some legitimate concerns about marijuana potency. A first-time user who happens upon some very high-octane marijuana could well have a more intense experience than they are prepared for. So could someone accustomed to lower-grade material who unexpectedly happens upon some high-quality sinsemilla.

There is an easy way to avert such unpleasant surprises, a method that's long been in use for alcoholic beverages: The bottle of white wine presently sitting in my refrigerator bears a label indicating an alcohol content of 13.7 percent, while the bottle of single-malt scotch I keep on hand for special occasions, contains 43 percent alcohol -- again clearly marked. Needless to say, I'll drink the scotch more slowly and judiciously than the wine.

Similar information could easily be given to marijuana consumers. But that, of course, would require replacing prohibition with a regulatory system similar to that now used for alcohol and tobacco. Oddly, neither Walters nor Volkow seem to have brought up that possibility.

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