**Don’t Let The Future Go To Pot**

There has been much in the news lately about marijuana. With Washington and Colorado passing recreational use laws, and our own state having a Medical Marijuana law, it’s no wonder that young people are confused about this gateway drug. To add to the confusion, Gov. Kitzhaber signed a bill into law legalizing medical marijuana ***storefronts***, a.k.a. “***dispensaries***”. How that will play out here in Tualatin, and in other cities across the state, has yet to be seen. Many cities are taking a “not in my backyard” approach, passing temporary bans on such establishments, until more clarification emerges on how that will look for Oregon. It is up to the Oregon Health Authority to establish procedures and guidelines for licensing and regulating these medical marijuana dispensaries.

As a teacher for the past 22 years, I have seen some of my own students fall into the dangerous pit of drug use. I am concerned about the recent trends I see in our young people regarding substance abuse, especially marijuana. I decided to do some research and share the results with you: parents, professionals, educators, and students, with a hope that we all can band together to help “our kids” have a bright future by choosing to live above the influence.

In the Tigard-Tualatin School District, students take the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey (OHT) and also the Oregon Student Wellness Survey (OSW). The data below corresponds with these surveys (taken in 8th and 11th grades). Additionally, some data is from the CDC’s Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF) and Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), or from the Oregon Health Authority(OHA) and research studies which have been conducted on Marijuana at various medical centers/universities.

First, let’s look at **Alcohol Use** among teens. These results are from the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey:

**8th Graders in TTSD: No Alcohol Use in the past 30 days:**

2007: 80.1%

2011: 85.4%

**11th Graders at TuHS: No Alcohol Use in the past 30 days:**

2007: 57.7%

2011: 59.0%

2012: 70.2%

2013: 72.8%

That is heading in the right direction… more of our students are choosing NOT to drink alcohol. Furthermore, statistics show that more TTSD students are choosing to abstain from alcohol use than other school districts across the state of Oregon.

More good news… **Cigarette use by teens** continues to decline. These results are from the Oregon Student Wellness Survey:

**11th Graders at TuHS: Smoked Cigarettes in the past 30 days:**

2011 : 11.3%, and 12.0% using other tobacco products

2012: 8.8%, and 5.1% using other tobacco, and 11.4% using hookah

**11th Graders in the TTSD: NO cigarette use in the past 30 days:**

2013: 91.9% and 98.8% report NO chewing tobacco/snuff use in the past 30 days.

The only data of serious concern regarding tobacco, is the use of e-cigarettes gaining popularity and use increasing. The CDC’s National Youth Tobacco Survey reported that **E-Cigarette use** is quickly rising, doubling between 2011-12, with 1.78 million students in middle and high school reporting that they have ever used e-cigarettes. The long-term risks of these devices are unknown. We need to do a better job, and allocate resources toward education about these devices, as well as restrictions on their sales to minors.

On the Marijuana front, we are facing some challenges. The access to this gateway drug, as well as a change in the perception that marijuana is not harmful has caused an increase in the use of pot- both here in Oregon and nationwide.

**11th Graders at TuHS: Perceived Risk of Regular Marijuana Use**

2011: 37.6% no or only slight harm

2012: 39.4% no or only slight harm

This is bad; more students believe that it is **not harmful** to smoke MJ regularly. Similarly, across the nation, the CDC reports that marijuana use has increased since 2007.

**CDC High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey:** High School Students reporting Marijuana Use in the past 30 days

2011: 23.1%

That certainly reflects what we are seeing here in Oregon, as shown in results from the Oregon Student Wellness Survey:

**11th Graders at TuHS: Marijuana Use in the past 30 days:**

2012: 17.5%

2013: 20%

In the Tigard-Tualatin School District, we have seen a corresponding increase in the number of Office Discipline Referrals for drugs. Tualatin High has seen a gradual rise from 24 referrals for the 2009-10 school year to 47 in 2012-13. This school year, with more of a focus on catching kids who are under the influence at school, we have had 53 Office Discipline Referrals through 3/3/2014. It may appear that more students are using, but what it probably means is just that we are **catching** more of them; a more accurate assessment of drug use in the school. This uptick in ODR’s at TUHS corresponds with the data from the

**CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Students reporting Marijuana Use at school:**

2009: 4.5%

2011: 5.9%

Males reported higher use rates (25.9% to females 20.1%) and also higher use rates on school property (7.5% to females 4.1%) according to the CDC’s YRBS.

Parents should be on the lookout for the new and more discreet ways their child could be using marijuana. For example, the smell of marijuana when smoked is very strong. Enter “Vape Pens”, battery-operated small vaporizers which look like a pen, but when you remove the cap, they are a sneaky tool which allows users to vaporize dry “herbs” like tobacco or marijuana. In this way, users are avoiding the smell (of tobacco or pot) and might be more likely to fly under the radar of school staff or parents. This was news to me, and to other teachers in our school. Nonetheless, one of our staff verified that this is often how our kids are using at school.

It is a confusing time for kids regarding marijuana. They are getting a mixed message about this drug, and it’s our responsibility as adults to do what we can to give our young people the real scoop on pot. Did you know that there are over 60,516 Oregon Medical Marijuana Patients, with 125 of them living in the 97062 zip code? An unforeseen problem with legalizing marijuana for medical OR recreational use as an adult, is that it increases access to the drug for our young people.

A February 2014 study at NYU Langone Medical Center. found that a large percentage of high school students normally at low risk for marijuana use (non-cigarette-smokers, religious students, those with friends who disapprove of use) reported intention to use marijuana if it were legal. “Our study focused on **intention to use** and it was the first to find that groups generally not “at risk” become more “at risk” when legalized,” said Joseph J. Palamar, PhD, MPH. This means that just having marijuana legalized will increase usage, even by those who previously avoided using just because it was illegal.

The young brain is especially vulnerable to marijuana. In a recent study (Northwestern Medicine, 2013), it was found that **even two years after a regular marijuana-smoker stops smoking, there may be permanent changes to the structures in their brains.** These marijuana-related brain abnormalities correlate with poor memory performance and look similar to schizophrenia-related brain abnormalities. Furthermore, the younger a person is when marijuana use begins, the **more severe the damage to their brain is**. A different study, released on July 1, 2013, conducted by scientists at Imperial College London, and King’s College London, found that “long-term cannabis users tend to **produce less dopamine**, a neurochemical directly linked to motivation and reward.“ They used PET brain imaging to see the effects- and those who began smoking marijuana at a younger age had the **lowest dopamine levels**. This lack of dopamine creates a cannabis-induced “a-motivational syndrome”. Additionally, even when subjects quit smoking pot two years earlier, those who started at a younger age had the lowest **current** levels of dopamine. This suggests that cannabis use may be the cause of the difference in dopamine levels.

We, as parents and educators, need to increase our efforts to educate young people about the potential health hazards associated with marijuana use. Additionally, we should encourage an active lifestyle, to stimulate the body’s own production of endocannibinoids. It is this natural endocannabinoid system that regulates anxiety and the body’s response to stress. Chronic stress or an acute emotional trauma can stunt this system, causing anxiety. Unfortunately, those who smoke marijuana to relieve anxiety end up short-circuiting their body’s own endocannabinoid system with repeated marijuana use. Encouraging drug-free activities, such as exercise, or yoga, or meditation, is likely more effective at reducing anxiety in the long run.

Tualatin High School will be hosting a program called “The Harmful Truth about Marijuana and Our Youth” on Monday, April 7th in the Tualatin High School Commons. A free dinner will be provided, along with childcare and translation if needed. Doors open at 5:00pm; presentation is 5:30-7:30pm. Featured panelists: Eric Martin, Adjunct Faculty member with the University of Oregon and Rob Bovett, Legal Counsel and Policy Manager for the Association of Oregon Counties.