Tempe does not need more marijuana clinics

In 2015, researchers at UCLA studied the impact of medical marijuana dispensaries on their surrounding neighborhoods in California. They found that the more dispensaries opened in a given area, the greater the frequency of marijuana use, as well as an increase in the number of marijuana-related hospitalizations.

"Policymakers may want to consider regulations that limit the density of dispensaries," they concluded.

Later this month, the Tempe City Council will be considering an expansion of medical marijuana dispensaries in the city from its current number of two to as many as 34. Although Arizona passed medical marijuana laws for limited use, it's useful to ask whether the city of Tempe — and particularly our young people — benefit from expanding its availability.

According to a 2015 national "Monitoring the Future" survey, the rate of "daily or near-daily" use of marijuana by young adults is on the rise. It now surpasses cigarette smoking, reaching its highest level since 1980, when the drug was only about one-fourth as potent as it is today. What group holds the highest number of medical marijuana cards in Arizona? Men ages 18 to 30.

Long-term harm

As an educator, I am deeply concerned about both the short-term and long-term harm that increased marijuana use may have on the development of our young people and on society. As a 2014 New England Journal of Medicine article noted, from childhood to about the age of 21, the brain is "intrinsic more vulnerable than a mature brain to the adverse long-term effects of environmental insults, such as exposure to tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the primary active in marijuana." Smoking marijuana, the article's authors explained, can impair "neural connectivity" in specific brain regions.

The effect on cognitive function is a reason for alarm. It can impair short-term memory and activities that require alertness and awareness, making it hard to retain information and learn. It can undermine motor coordination, affecting the ability to drive and increasing the risk of accidents and injuries. And this increased incapacity can make it more challenging to complete school work, leading to poor grades — and ultimately undermine success in life. As the journal's authors summarized, "Heavy marijuana use has been linked to lower income, greater need for socioeconomic assistance, unemployment, criminal behavior and lower satisfaction with life."

Current Tempe zoning requires a quarter-mile separation of dispensaries from schools, although this now applies only to elementary and secondary schools. Current state law requires only a 500-foot separation from public or private schools. The neighboring cities of Phoenix, Mesa and Chandler all require a one-mile separation. If the council decides that limiting the number of dispensaries is not appropriate, it would certainly make sense for the city of Tempe to follow the practice of its neighbors and approve a one-mile separation, adding our university property to its definition of school.

Keep dispensaries distant

Reducing the proximity of marijuana dispensaries from our campuses is one way we can reduce the enticement. But I urge both our citizens and councilors to consider whether making this drug more available by increasing the number of distribution points is worth endangering some of our most vulnerable family members and neighbors.

Our state's prosperity depends on increasing the number of able, educated citizens and making use of all the brain power we can rally. As Arizona State University continues to expand and advance, it is our responsibility to provide the most positive environment for our students and their families.

Increasing the number of medical marijuana dispensaries would not be a step forward. I hope Tempe citizens will let their representatives know that they reject a plan to add more dispensaries in our community.

Michael M. Crow is the president of Arizona State University.

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