Wellness Not Intoxication

By Stephen DeAngelo, Co-Founder and Executive Director

Today, the cannabis reform movement sits at the crossroads between wellness and intoxication. For the past 15 years, the movement has achieved unprecedented success by defending the rights of Americans to use cannabis as a medicine. Now, many segments of the movement argue it is time to shift strategy, and promote the idea of legalizing cannabis for recreational purposes. I disagree.

Human beings have recognized cannabis as a medicine and a sacrament for thousands of years. In fact, the very first mention of cannabis in recorded history was in a Chinese medical text. Its history as an intoxicant is much more recent, and is largely a construct of prohibitionist forces. Until the 1850s, when a small group of French writers discovered and promoted its psychoactive properties, cannabis users themselves almost always described the plant with medical and spiritual terminology.

It took almost another century, until the Hearst newspaper campaign of the 1920-30's, for the public image of cannabis to become firmly fixed as an intoxicant. For two decades, dozens of Hearst newspapers bombarded America with images of Mexicans and African Americans, lead into lives of vice and violence by the devil weed. In the public mind, cannabis was transformed from an obscure ingredient in patent medicines, to an intoxicant whose use would lead inevitably to dissolution and debauchery. The prohibitionist campaign to reconfigure cannabis from something that makes you well, to something that gets you high, achieved its ultimate goal in 1937, when the federal government made cannabis illegal for all purposes.

It is tragically ironic that since then, successive generations of cannabis users have unwittingly embraced and advanced the prohibitionist paradigm of cannabis as an intoxicant. Cultural manifestations of this embrace include such silliness as Cheech & Chong, Cypress Hill, Weeds, and a whole slew of stupid Hollywood stoner flicks. Were this the only consequence of accepting the idea of cannabis as intoxicant, it might not be so dangerous. However, in the greatest of ironies, this concept that originated with prohibitionists has found political expression today in the idea of legalizing cannabis for recreational purposes.

When I first became an activist, almost forty years ago, our movement had no institutional memory of cannabis as anything other than an intoxicant. One of the iconic early images of our movement encapsulates this reality: the photo of a young Allen Ginsburg holding a poster that reads “Pot Is Fun”.

For many a long and lonely year, the cannabis reform movement was overwhelmed by the likes of DARE, Just Say No, and the Partnership for A Drug Free America. The specter of a stoned nation, losing its competitive edge to a culture of self-indulgent hedonism, was successfully deployed by our opponents to justify re-criminalization, urine testing, denial of student and housing aid, and draconian sentences. The personal choice to get high was transformed by our opponents into a threat against all society.

With unrestrained hedonism and social decline. At the end of the day, Americans were more concerned with preserving economic progress and social stability, than with an individual right to intoxication.

Astute movement strategists began to recognize that we needed to offer the American public more than another way to get high, if we were ever to move public opinion. The first of these was Jack Herer, and the industrial hemp movement he sparked; which was tremendously successful at educating Americans about the ecological and economic benefits of cannabis. It was the first time our movement seriously focused on cannabis as anything other than an intoxicant, but industrial hemp failed to generate any meaningful legal changes.

The strategic breakthrough that put us on the road to our current success occurred in the early 1990s, when Dennis Peron redefined cannabis as a public health necessity for AIDS-ravaged San Francisco. Voters responded by passing Proposition P, the first in a long string of electoral and legislative victories for the new medical cannabis movement. The successful strategy of explaining the medical uses of cannabis was adopted by activists from all over North America, leading to the longest string of electoral and legislative victories in the history of the cannabis movement.

Today, with medical cannabis laws in sixteen states and the District of Columbia, the cannabis reform movement is at a crossroads. Some voices are calling for a change in strategy, arguing that the emphasis on medical cannabis leaves the majority of cannabis users without legal protection, and that therefore the movement should advocate for legalization of cannabis for recreational purposes. Other voices—including me—call for a renewed movement-wide emphasis on cannabis as a medicine. The direction we take, and how successful we are, will be decided by our understanding of the fundamental nature of cannabis.
Cannabis for extremely compromised patients. New Jersey and Washington DC, which reserve the endocannabinoid system are ignored. The therapies and substances have proven ineffective and to be tried only when all other possible techniques like pharmaceuticals and surgeries. This is due to its supposed “high potential for abuse”, a palliative agent; reserved only for gravely ill patients to make medical decisions, without protection. Our movement should build on these postulates, by building the need for recreation within the context of wellness, rather than the context of getting high. We can argue from a position of intoxication, and help more Americans understand why we place so much value on this plant.

The soccer moms of America are never going to buy the argument that their kid needs one more drug, high or low, on no matter how safe or natural that thing is. But they might vote in favor of allowing adult citizens to make their own decisions about their health and wellness decisions. Legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes—a strategy that emphasizes cannabis as an intoxicant—plays right into the hands of the prohibitionists, who are inching for another opportunity to portray cannabis users as addicts, and at the same time, make their own medical decisions. Given the new discoveries about cannabis, doctors would be well justified in turning to doctors of America—if they were allowed to follow their own judgment.

If local political conditions are challenging, a less ambitious step could be taken toward the same goal. In New Jersey and other states with extremely restrictive medical cannabis laws, legislation and initiatives could expand the list of qualifying conditions, so more people could benefit. If we want to change the public perception, we have to have scientific evidence for this position.

In states that have already authorized these avenues, we might find that the doctors and their patients are better off. And at the same time, as we move from the dinner table to the boardroom, we note that the fastest growing class of drugs on the planet are erectile dysfunction drugs. And at the moment one: "I reply by asking our patient to describe exactly how he uses cannabis, and what benefits it brings to him."

As we move from the dinner table to the boardroom, we note that the fastest growing class of drugs on the planet are erectile dysfunction drugs. These include: a libido enhancer that stops tumor growth with virtually no side effects; an effective topical relief for rheumatoid arthritis and psoriasis, and the most promising agent for the prevention of suicide & depression. (recently taken off the market due to high risk of respiratory depression). Instead of listing the limitations and inaccuracies of the illness model of cannabis, our movement should ensure that all legislation embraces the wellness model of cannabis, and is therefore expansive enough to bring all adults under its umbrella.

The centerpieces of this approach should be the defense of the traditional rights of doctors and patients to make their own medical decisions, and the inference from unqualified politicians or bureaucrats. In California, doctors are permitted to recommend medical cannabis for any purpose for which it is effective, just as with all other medicines. However, all other medical cannabis users in California must restrict doctors to define medical cannabis for the purpose of intoxication, and help more Americans understand why we place so much value on this plant.

The cannabis reform movement should insist that doctors who recommend cannabis be allowed to do so for any medical reason, and make their own medical decisions. Given the new discoveries about cannabis, doctors would be well justified in turning to doctors of America—if they were allowed to follow their own judgment.

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Studies of individual cannabinoids like CBD have revealed many heretofore unrecognized therapeutic effects, and are already serving as the foundation of development of precisely targeted single-molecule medicines. The US government may not believe in the medical efficacy of cannabis, but the most enlightened segments of the pharmaceutical industry have been avidly studying it for many years.

Today, our movement stands at the crossroads between wellness and intoxication. The idea of recreational use, or intoxication as an individual right, was tried and failed by the cannabis reform movement long before most of today’s activists became involved—and indeed before some of them were born. In the intervening years, the power of the religious right and social conservatives has increased, along with public anxiety about the American economy and global competition. If cannabis reform movement begins to emphasize the right to get high, as expressed in the idea of legalizing marijuana for recreational purposes, we must expect these opponents to deploy the same arguments about hedonism and social decay that were so effective in the 1980’s.

They will argue that it is not simply a matter of an individual right, but that the aggregate effect of so many people getting high all the time will constitute a threat to society itself, and especially to America’s economic wellbeing. They will answer our arguments about increased tax revenue and decreased law enforcement costs, with the position that all those benefits will be eclipsed by the economic impact of unrestrained hedonism. We would be tremendously naïve to think such arguments will no longer resonate with the American public. Do we really want to risk a re-run of the eighties; a potentially disastrous jump from our most successful strategy, to one with a proven history of failure?

On the other hand, the road of wellness has yielded the longest sustained period of success our movement has ever seen. It enjoys the overwhelming support of the American public, and is resoundingly confirmed by hard science. It has generated new systems of legal cannabis distribution, and a huge wave of momentum, which is gathering steam with every passing day. It fits with the traditional American ethic of hard work and self reliance, and provides our political allies a defensible way to support cannabis law reform. Most importantly, the idea of wellness is consistent with the way the overwhelming majority of people truly use this most amazing and blessed plant.

As we sit here at the crossroads, considering the best direction, let’s take some time to smell the flowers. One of the most beautiful and inspiring things about the cannabis plant is the way it has drawn so many people, of such diverse backgrounds, into one community and one movement. We all come here from different routes; we have different experiences, and different ideas about how to get things done. The existence of the strategic debate outlined in this paper is a mark of the maturity of our movement, which is now large enough to hold a wide diversity of opinion. This is a good thing, a healthy thing. May we always remember that though we walk different paths, we are all moving toward the same goal. May we act in a way that the spirit of cannabis herself would be proud of us, and treat each other with respect, and gentleness, and humility. I salute each and every one of you who loves this plant, and has done something (even if it’s a small thing) to make it free. Together, we will get there.

Steve DeAngelo

A Life Well Lived in the Cannabis Movement

Steve DeAngelo is an inspired leader, who has contributed four decades of activism and advocacy to the cannabis reform movement. His vision and leadership have been featured by news teams from around the globe including major news outlets in the United States, Canada, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The media has described Steve’s landmark Harborside Health Center as a model facility that combines safe access to a wide range of lab-tested cannabis medicines, along with a full complement of free patient services, including a holistic healing clinic. Steve’s other accomplishments include co-founding Steep Hill Laboratory, the nation’s first cannabis testing laboratory; and ten years as CEO of Ecolution, a pioneering manufacturer of industrial hemp goods. He is also President of the ArcView Group Angel Investment Network.

Steve has been featured by The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, the Associated Press, The Wall Street Journal, NPR, and the BBC; Fortune Magazine and literally every major network news source in the country. His creation of a model medical cannabis dispensary and lifelong cannabis activism, coupled with his extensive knowledge in this arena, has made him one of the most respected national thinkers and speakers in the cannabis and hemp industries.