Prepared Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

"Marijuana and America's Health: Questions and Issues for Policymakers"
October 23, 2019

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The point of today's hearing is to better understand marijuana's impact on public health, and I thank you for holding it.

Marijuana is complex. It contains hundreds of chemical entities, all of which produce different effects.

Much of what we know about marijuana is anecdotal, which is problematic for policymakers, medical professionals, and consumers.

This is due, in part, to the fact that marijuana's status as a schedule I drug makes it difficult to research. It is my strong belief that science should inform future policy. That is why I, along with Senator Grassley and others, introduced the Cannabidiol and Marijuana Research Expansion Act, which would remove barriers to research.

The National Institutes of Health recently increased the number of grants it awarded to study marijuana, and I hope it will continue to do so. This will enable marijuana's potential therapeutic benefits to be more fully explored.

It is particularly important that we learn more about appropriate dosing and delivery mechanisms, how marijuana components interact with other medications, and how long term use impacts the body.

Limited existing research has found varying degrees of evidence that components of marijuana may effectively treat conditions like intractable epilepsy, chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, muscle spasticity, chronic pain, and short term sleep disturbances. The Food and Drug Administration has approved four marijuana-derived drugs to treat many of these illnesses.

However, despite its potential benefits, it is equally important to understand marijuana's adverse effects.

For instance, studies show that marijuana can have a negative impact on the developing brain, including decreased cognitive abilities, loss of IQ, and increased risk of psychosis.

But the full scope and duration of these impacts, and the degree to which various THC levels and frequency of use may effect these outcomes, is not well understood.

THC levels have increased dramatically. Strains of marijuana for sale in states that have legalized can range from 18 to 23 percent. The range is even higher for concentrates - from 24 to 76 percent.

Yet, we have little understanding of the impacts of increased THC levels. The limited existing research indicates that the risks of physical dependence, addiction, and unpredictable or adverse reactions increase.

It is concerns like these that prompted the Surgeon General to issue an advisory, warning that no amount of

marijuana is safe for adolescents and pregnant women.

Available research also demonstrates that marijuana use impacts judgement and coordination, two functions that are critical to driving. But a universal standard to detect marijuana impaired driving does not exist. This puts public safety at risk.

Candidly, I believe that policy has gotten in front of science, and that there is still much to be learned about marijuana and its impacts.

In 2018, there were 27.6 million current marijuana users. More than 9 million were between the ages of 12 and 25, meaning their brains are not yet fully developed. As more states legalize, these numbers will increase.

Moreover, each state has different laws in place regarding the testing, labeling or packaging of marijuana products, the strength of products that may be sold, how they may be advertised, how they may be accessed.

This lack of uniformity can lead to consumer confusion, which may produce unintended, acute public health effects, including increased emergency room visits.

These effects can be exacerbated if state laws are not effectively enforced. In recent months, for instance, we have seen significant increases in those who experienced lung injuries after using electronic cigarettes and vaping products. Investigations are ongoing, but the majority of the nearly 1,500 reported injuries and 33 deaths involve THC products obtained on the black market.

For all of these reasons, it is imperative to better understand the potential benefits and risks associated with marijuana, and to use this knowledge to guide future research and policy. So I very much look forward to hearing what today's experts have to say.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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