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PERSPECTIVE: A bad trip ahead for Colorado

Henny Lasley and Rachel O'Bryan Nov 12, 2023

Stop us if you heard this one before:

National activists bankroll a ballot issue to legalize a psychoactive drug as "medicine" in Colorado, using our state as a policy Petri dish for their experiment.

Soon a profit-driven industry has exploded, pushing open loopholes placed in the ballot language to create money-making opportunities that stretch any rational definition of medicine (or the quaint homegrown approach voters might have thought they were approving).

Next an adult drug is — unlike prescription or over-the-counter medicines — coming in sweet flavors and in the form of candy. These are predictably tempting to young kids.

Unsurprisingly, kids knowingly and unknowingly eat delicious candies that are laced with potent doses of an adult drug. The kids are confused and terrified as they experience intense mental effects.

They end up in crisis, often in emergency departments.

By now, we know this all-too-familiar story with THC, the high-inducing drug derived from the marijuana plant.

But are you ready for the sequel, this time with psychedelics?

Last year, Colorado voters approved Proposition 122, which legalized certain psychedelics, after a campaign where proponents vastly outspent opponents. Proponents talked up the "natural medicines" and "healing centers."

While the psychedelic plants can't legally be sold, there's a rapidly growing market for related services.

The profit-chasing psychedelics industry is just getting started. The latest national conference covers topics like "business opportunities in psychedelics," "investment advice," and "the for-profit psychedelic business model." It is revealing that it is taking place in Las Vegas in conjunction with the nation's largest marijuana business convention.

Mistakes with psychedelics

There's now a real possibility that the state of Colorado might authorize psilocybin to be put in candy and sold commercially.

Colorado, which is facing the consequences of insufficient guardrails around today's unprecedented high-THC products, has set the stage for this new threat to Colorado's kids. It's time for policymakers and regulators to step up to protect the public.

Concerned parents formed our organization, One Chance To Grow Up, to look out for kids after marijuana was legalized for adult recreational use a decade ago. We've seen the way commercialization can create chaos and endanger public health.

Today's ultrahigh THC products have little if anything in common with the cannabis plant. Insufficient transparency when it comes to THC serving size and package amounts leads to confusion. Sweet and fruity flavors have attracted kids to these highly potent products.

The last thing Colorado can afford now is to make the same mistakes with psychedelics.

Why did we form our nonprofit a decade ago? Simple. We could not watch from the sidelines when a governor-appointed task force, composed mostly of marijuana industry advocates, ranked last in their priorities the impact of commercialized marijuana sales on Colorado kids.

We've got the battle scars to show what it's like to challenge the industry lobby when a public health and safety concern is raised. We watched as the profit-driven industry shrugged every time a threat to kids was raised with regulators or policymakers. They tried to shame parents courageous enough to tell their personal tragic stories.

Yet, we've persisted; we've grown to over 10,000 members and are supported by leading health experts, policymakers and community leaders.

Lessons learned

We must learn from the past to be better as a state going forward. Now is the time to enact safeguards, before things spiral out of control.

Here's what we've learned.

Neither THC nor psilocybin belong in candy or other enticing edible forms. The risks to kids are significant. According to a 2023 study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, there was a 1,375% increase from 2017-2021 in accidental consumption of THC edibles by kids under six years. One in five required hospitalization.

This is not an abstract or far-off threat. According to one recent Colorado news report, psilocybin edibles "are already out there and easy to procure for any nonsquare with internet access." The report includes a picture of "milk chocolate" psychedelic mushrooms with packaging that depicts an ice cream cone.

Additional protections must include the following:

- No sweeteners, no flavors, no colors. Psilocybin is a powerful psychedelic drug. If the industry believes in the power of the drug and its outcomes, then packaging and the way the drug is manufactured must demonstrate that it's about the effect, not the consumption experience.
- Any distilled or processed product that contains psilocybin should come in a pill or tablet or capsule form and be properly marked with a warning symbol. "All approved prescription and over-the-counter

solid, oral dosage form medications in the U.S. are required by the FDA to have an imprint", according to the FDA, and these medications can be identified on [drugs.com](https://www.drugs.com). A tasteless, colorless pill or tablet is easily swallowed but it isn't appealing to kids.

- The psilocybin industry must take child-resistant packaging seriously. However, this should not give free rein to create any product containing psychedelic mushrooms that is in any way attractive to kids as older kids can open child-resistant packaging.

Transparency is absolutely essential:

- This includes properly and clearly identifying everything contained in a product, how much to take, strength (or potency), and disclosure of all known physical and mental health risks.
- Regulations must include proper warnings and there must be a state public-awareness campaign identifying the risks, especially to youths. The science is still in its infancy so we should err on the side of caution.
- Every product must be packaged as a single serving to minimize the risk if ingested by a child. Adult consumers also deserve full disclosure of what constitutes a serving size for their safety. Serving size must be standardized to best protect the public.
- Every marijuana product container now must have a universal symbol on the label and most edibles must have the symbol on the actual product to alert the public that it contains THC. Why would we venture into psychedelics without a similar symbol? A standard universal symbol for psilocybin will allow for a public awareness campaign to highlight risks and precautions.
- Don't make a regulated drug made exclusively for adults easy to hide. This practice is prolific in the THC marijuana industry. If you need proof, go to our product education website, THCphotos.org, to see an array of easily concealed products that contain highly potent THC. Just last week, we purchased a "biscotti" flavored disposable vaporizer that is about the size of a container of tic-tacs, a perfect fit for a jean pocket. THC now comes in the form of odorless, colorless powder that is advertised with a banner that says "make everything an edible." What could go wrong?

Terminology, images and messaging are stealth ways to influence the public. According to the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, a biannual survey of middle and high school students across the state, teens continue to have the lowest perception of harm from regular marijuana use compared to alcohol, cigarettes and e-cigarettes.

Getting it right

Our state regulators should carefully monitor psychedelic product messaging and labeling to ensure packaging is not attractive to kids and does not make unproven health claims:

- The emerging psilocybin industry should never be allowed to leverage kid or teen culture in marketing. We've seen this nationally with the THC industry including strains of marijuana named Samoas after Girl Scout cookies and even referencing Disney characters.
- A drug used under the guidance of self-identified experts at "healing centers" needs only simple, plain packaging like a prescription drug. This is an adult drug intended for only adults. In fact, why allow branding at all?
- Psilocybin, so long as it is sold commercially outside of a pharmacy and not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), should not be allowed to be marketed as "medicine." We have seen the

impact on kids of calling marijuana “medicine,” complete with green crosses and claims of health benefits. Yet there are no studies or proof of safety for the ultrapotent marijuana products sold today in Colorado while science shows THC harms the developing brain up to age 25.

- We’ve also seen the THC industry use social media platforms in ways that engage teens. The cautionary tale of Juul, recounted in the new Netflix documentary “Big Vape,” shows how this can create a public health epidemic.
- Social media posts and online journalists often use the benign toadstool emoji (red and white) when reporting or discussing psilocybin. Parents should remain vigilant that these often are a drug reference.

Data collection is critical. We must track the consequences such as accidental ingestions, youth use rates, where kids obtained the products, and related hospitalization rates to name just a few important metrics to determine how well the regulations protect society and if they need to be revised.

Have no doubt that the psilocybin industry knows the tricks that worked in marijuana. They use innocuous-sounding language to get the camel’s nose under the tent and then push and push for more commercialization. Many veteran marijuana industry folks are lobbying and participating in the process to regulate the psychedelic drugs allowed under Proposition 122. Their playbook is the same.

We have watched as many government regulators appear to value tax revenues over public health and public safety. The favorite refrain “It will hurt our sales!” is used to argue against safety regulations.

We have seen the revolving door of elected officials and regulators leave their government posts to work for the more lucrative marijuana industry.

We’ve been down this road before; same song, second verse. Regrettably, Colorado kids will pay the price for the actions of those who care only about the bottom line.

When legalizing new dangerous drugs, we must always start by making sure we don’t harm kids.

So what can you do to have your voice heard?

- To learn more about the implementation of the measure and the regulatory process, visit the Department of Regulatory Agencies
- Provide written feedback. The state mailbox to share your opinions is:
dora_natural_medicine@state.co.us.

Your voice matters so let your elected officials know if you have concerns or comments that you believe the Governor-appointed board overseeing the process should know.

Every Coloradan should feel empowered to hold their officials accountable if they stray from this commitment to the health, safety and welfare of the next generations.

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One Chance to Grow Up protects kids from THC through transparency, education, empowerment, and policy. We don’t take sides on the politics of legalization but instead serve as a reliable resource for parents, media, policymakers, and all who care about kids. Started by concerned parents, we’re a 501(c)(3) nonprofit supported by charitable contributions.

