

Just say no to marijuana on Nov. 6

by John Jemewouk
for the Tundra Times

As voters statewide prepare to return to the polls Nov. 6, many will be struggling with the question of whether to support recriminalization of marijuana.

OPINION Inupiat Paitot People's Heritage

Some may be reluctant to give up their own habit; others will be concerned about friends and family members who will suddenly be breaking the law if "personal use" is revoked; and others might question whether we should enact a law which will be so difficult to enforce.

The decision to approve or disapprove of marijuana is especially relevant to Alaska Native communities where individual triumphs and tragedies are shared by every person in the village.

Loss of health, life, self-esteem and productivity hurt the entire community and hamper its ability to deal with other problems.

Alaska Natives are well aware of the destructive effects of drug abuse through our experience with alcohol.

Many Native communities have taken positive steps to reduce drug abuse by enacting "local option" ordinances banning the sale and importation of alcohol. At the same time, many individuals have made the personal choice of sobriety.

Whatever the success in keeping alcohol out of the villages may be, voting to be "dry" or "damp" at the



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very least sends a message that community residents recognize the dangers of alcohol abuse and the benefits of sobriety.

This message in turn encourages individuals to examine their own alcohol use and make the decision to quit. It also earns the respect of people outside the village by saying, "We are serious about sobriety. We are serious about helping ourselves."

Now the state of Alaska is giving us the opportunity to send the same message about marijuana. Over-shadowed by alcohol as a drug problem in Native communities, marijuana nevertheless takes its toll.

Both personal observation and scientific evidence tell us that marijuana is not a harmless drug. It contains cancer-causing chemicals — 50 percent more "tar" than cigarettes.

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memory. It affects social development for young users. It impairs communication and problem solving within marriages, families and communities. It contributes to snowmachine, boating and automobile accidents.

Use by a pregnant woman can lead to low birth weight for her infant.

A recent survey of Alaskan adolescents sponsored in part by the state of Alaska and the Alaska Area Native Health Service found that more than 45 percent of the teen-agers surveyed in grades 10-12 had used marijuana. Over one-fifth of those in grades seven to nine had tried it.

These figures are extremely alarming, considering that adolescence is such a critical period for intellectual, emotional, moral and social development. We also know that drug habits often are first established in adolescence.

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Alaska is currently the only state which allows recreational use of marijuana. This fact is a cause of great consternation to health professionals and health educators, who must try to convince funding sources Outside that we are serious about addressing the problems of drug abuse, when at the same time we tell Alaskans, "Marijuana is OK." Sending mixed messages undermines our credibility.

On Nov. 6, we will have the opportunity to make a strong statement about drug abuse. Voters need to ask themselves a simple question: Is marijuana really OK, or should its use be discouraged?

An honest examination of the facts should tell you the truth. Now it's time to tell all Alaskans: Just say no to marijuana.

John Jemewouk is the chairman of the Alaska Native Health Board.