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Can Medical Marijuana Reduce Drug Deaths?

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For those who predict that legalizing medical marijuana is a slippery slope to more addiction and drug deaths, here's some food for thought.

Researchers, led by experts from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center, report that in states where it's legal to use medical marijuana to manage chronic pain and other conditions, the annual number of deaths from prescription drug overdose is almost 25 percent lower than in states where medical marijuana remains illegal. The research was reported in the August 25 issue of *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

"In absolute terms, states with a medical marijuana law had about 1,700 fewer opioid painkiller overdose deaths in 2010 than would be expected based on trends before the laws were passed," says the study's lead author, Marcus Bachhuber, MD, of the Philadelphia VA and the University of Pennsylvania.

Skeptical about who/what funded the study? Don't be. The grants came from the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Drug Abuse; the Center for AIDS Research at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore Medical Center; the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; and the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Not a marijuana farmer in the bunch.

Using death certificate data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the researchers found that the rate of prescription painkiller overdose deaths increased in all states from 1999 to 2010. However, states with medical marijuana laws saw, on average, the double digit reduction in the yearly rate of opioid painkiller overdose deaths.

The researchers do caution that the benefits and risks of using medical marijuana to treat chronic pain may remain unclear, and more study on that is needed. Of course, as I've said before, the problem with research on medical marijuana is that the federal government hampers those studies by continuing to classify marijuana as a Schedule 1 drug, grouping it with the likes of heroin, LSD, ecstasy, methaqualone, and peyote. It's past time to rethink that.