GETTING REAL ABOUT GETTING HIGH

An Interview with Andrew Weil, M.D.

BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

The current was an drugs in the national knowledge about drugs. There has been no debate about the assumptions that underlie our laws, or about the reasons for many people—old, young, and some—whose efforts to break them. If anything, the antidrug crusades have been, as they are, the elimination of discussion and discussion.

In 1983, Andrew Weil, a drug researcher and writer, wrote a book about what he called The Natural Mind: Understanding Mind-Active Drugs (Harper & Row). It is a remarkable book, even for adults, but its language and content that drugs are being used by teenagers. Teaching adolescents who want to use drugs how to do so with the least damage to self and society is controversial in liberal times, but in the current climate, that idea seems, to some, imperative.

Paula Hawkins (Republican, Florida) who faces a tough battle for her Senate seat, recently read selections from Weil's book into the Congressional Record. "With drug abuse running rampant," she proclaimed, "we may well ask ourselves why it is that our children are being exposed to such danger..." she recommended that all curricula be redirected to teach our children to say no to drugs. No more teaching about responsible use. As a result of Hawkins' objections, the Tampa school board voted to remove From Chocolate to Morphone from school library shelves. How the senator supports that decision? "Her statement speaks to the point," said a spokesperson for the senator, "so we decided to say no more.

Andrew Weil, a lecturer at the University of Arizona College of Medicine, has written several books on drugs and consciousness, including The Natural Mind (Harper & Row). "The truth about drugs cannot be denied," Weil writes, "it may offend sensibilities and disturb those who do not want to hear it but it cannot hurt people. On the other hand, false information can and does lead people to hurt themselves and others. People make decisions on the basis of the information available to them. The more accurate the information, the better their decisions will be.

What's going on now? Well, I think there's a political and medical consensus that more severe things have been seen in the 20 years I've been involved in this issue. Some of it is because the solutions are approaching some of it is to divert people's attention from issues that are more serious. Some of it is generated by the news media which have learned that fearmongering sells programs and papers.

But the media are always optimistic, and there are always serious problems that are trying to hide. Why didn't this happen 20 years ago?

It was happening 10 years ago, but not in an extreme form. I think it is the same stuff that is going on now. It is still the same, and it is constantly evolving by the time I write this, a lot of it is motivated by state laws against the Chinese. There was an anti-Mandarin paranoia in this country for 20 years, a lot of it was motivated by racial prejudice against the Chinese. There was an anticomunist hysteria that ran through the time of the First World War, which was motivated by racial prejudice against blacks. There was a lot of that still going on in the 1960s and 1970s, and all the stuff around psychedelics, which produced tremendous polarization of society. Whenever a new incident comes into a culture, it involves the kind of response. Usually, the people who take drugs are the kids who are going to be the deviants—the subcultures and ethnic minorities and others; they're perceived with suspicion already and their drug use is idolized by that. There was an antiracism from Europe and Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries, when some countries tried to prohibit its use by the death penalty. That didn't work; in fact, if anything, it hardened the spread of it.

Are drugs more prevalent in America today?

Well, no. I think we've always been a drug-ridden society. There probably were as many recreational drugs in use 50 years ago. But there was no crime associated with drugs. There was no use of these drugs by very young children. There was no push of them to drop out of society and act out crimes or agitate against authority. I think all of those features of the drug problem are creations of our policies. The more we create stiffer penalties and so forth, the more we produce the very thing we want to change. As I say, the policies that we've followed have created the problems that we're afraid of. The reason we have kids using drugs today is because of the problems, we've been trying to deal with through criminal law. It has made drugs attractive and it has made worse forms of drugs come into existence.

Do you anticipate that the result of this hysteria will be that drugs become more prevalent?

Yes, I think that they will continue to be prevalent, and to be used in worse and worse ways. By more and more people. Wages of drugs never work. They always result in a situation to stimulate interest and curiosity, and the rest of people, some wouldn't be interested in them. It

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If you want to talk about the death penalty for drug pushers start with the executives of tobacco companies.

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feeling frenzied, and the fact that I don’t see people standing up to be counted on the other side, makes me feel that this is really not the time to do the duties in public. I just don’t want to draw that kind of response.

Are you a licensed physician?

No, I’m not, and obviously, life can be made difficult in that area. The thing is, this is all past generation. My current work is in alternative medicine; I have a medical practice, so my research on medicinal plants. I’m not actively doing this drug stuff any more.

So you’re tempted to retreat?

Yeah, but I’ve got it all out there. Over the past few weeks, when I’ve been asked to be on TV and radio shows, I’ve turned them down and told them that they can go read the book.

How do you know that your information about the effects of drugs is accurate? You yourself talk about the highly subjective nature of these substances. I know it both, first of all, from my own experience with them, and, secondly, from having studied them from many different perspectives. I’ve studied drugs from the point of view of botany and medicine, and psychology, and psychiatry, and addiction, and religion, and cultural matters, and the environment where the drug is used, both the physical environment, and the cultural environment. And some factors are major determinants of drug effects, at least as important as pharmacology. So I don’t use anything about, say, PCP that makes people violent. I think it is likely to do that in certain doses and situations. The majority of people who use PCP are prone to violence and switch their drug of choice and frustration—so get messed up. In that context, it’s very likely to cause violent behavior.

Let’s design a curriculum for high school students that would be realistic about drugs. How would you approach that first, so that people have a sense of how new and setting off the issue of drugs. And then you could talk about the problem as a whole. The idea of taking drugs to get out of bad moods, for example, or taking drugs when you’re tired, or to do it with people who use hallucinogenic pastes in that way. And I would try to encourage people to read reading methods of preventing their needs. I think that’s very legitimate. Is U.S. talk about forming a relationship with drugs, how would you define a bad relationship? Addiction is one example. Unconventional use of a drug—that is, not knowing what it is or not knowing that you’re using a drug. Using it frequently that you’re impairing your health or your social or your work, or your ability to function. There’s a frequency that it’s lost a desired effect.

Right. And losing the ability to do it is a step on the way to using it addictively.

To continue, the most obvious what general arguments do you have? I think, first, a very important one that: The addictive potential of it is very great, that the physical harmfulness is not, that the addictive potential of it is increased by using it in the body in very direct ways, that the consequences of addiction to heroin are not severe in terms of terms of liming of freedom—and then you know about that, and that all addicts think they can avoid addiction at the beginning.

Let’s though, that heroin is not more addictive than cigarettes. I think cigarettes are more addictive than heroin.

So in effect when you teach young people about cigarettes you would be very severe. I would say that you should never smoke a cigarette. I think if you want to experiment with tobacco, you should put some in your mouth and chew it, see what the effects are and then you can decide if you want to use it or not, but it is not unreasonable to smoke a cigarette to see if you like it or not, because the risk of addiction is too great.

What about coffee? The thing to emphasize is that it’s a very safe drug, with a high addictive potential and also the potential to alter behavior significantly and affect the body. It should not be thought of as a beverage, and it should be used only occasionally, not regularly.

How would you reduce the incidence of drug-related crimes? If drugs were legislated there would be no drug-related crime. Do you think that?

Most of the crime associated with drugs has to do with their uncontrolled distribution, which is a direct consequence of their illegal status, so that people have to get the money to afford them, which in turn involves committing crimes. But the pharmaceutical effects of many drugs are quite significant—like heroin, which is actually true with heroin, and probably with marijuana.

One thing we haven’t talked about is the demographics of drug use. If you were living in the heart of the heart of the black woman living in the States who was at great danger of being mugged by a drug-exclusively male drug user, wouldn’t you feel differently? Probably.

You see these faces at the anticrack rallies, a lot of them are poor people who are just too busy with their lives.

Right.

What would you say to these people? That governmental policies—not crack or heroin or any other substances—have put you in danger. And that, as a result of these policies, every action associated with the problem has gotten bigger and worse.

Research Robert Highway