

State must enforce safe standards for pesticide use in marijuana production

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King County and the state must make it a priority to research and establish the safest standards for pesticides and cannabis, and then fully and uniformly enforce these standards.

By

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Special to The Times

As parents, it's our absolute worst fear. For Lisa, it began when her 6-month-old daughter Cynthia was diagnosed with Dravet syndrome, a rare form of epilepsy.

Her child's small body would spend the next five-plus years racked daily by punishing, life-threatening seizures — until Lisa discovered that a cannabis tincture could control the neurological disease that would otherwise cause her daughter's death. Today, Cynthia is 9 and is an energetic and vivacious little girl.

When Washingtonians legalized cannabis for recreational use in 2012, consumers were assured safe products. But as The Seattle Times recently reported, fines are now being levied by the Washington State Liquor Cannabis Board (LCB) against two major cannabis producers for using illegal pesticides. I was distressed to learn one of the businesses in violation markets cannabis medicines for children just like Cynthia.

Parents of these children are very concerned. In this case, the cannabis producer utilized myclobutanil, a banned compound that releases hydrogen cyanide when heated, a substance that even minute traces of in the air will kill a human within 10 to 60 minutes. As Lisa explains, "I am scared my daughter's health has been made worse."

Because of the failures of our system, her cure could be worse than the disease.

These violators were only discovered through consumer complaints and public-record requests, not because of the LCB's safety measures. New reports indicate illegal pesticides may be rampant in the legal system, likely because the LCB relies primarily on producer self-reporting and on-site random inspections without also requiring pesticide testing of the consumable product.

The LCB's inadequate regulation of the state's approved testing labs is another roadblock to safe cannabis. An independent analysis has shown wide variation between the labs' results — some labs never find contaminated product and other labs find contaminated product nearly half the time. The LCB has no system to ensure these different labs are all calibrated alike and testing fairly. It's no surprise that the labs approving all products have the most clients, nearly guaranteeing the flow of contaminated product into the hands — and lungs — of consumers and patients, adults and children alike.

Washington currently allows the usage of more than 200 pesticides, even though the health effects from inhaling or ingesting pesticides on cannabis and cannabis products are unclear. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has not yet approved any pesticides for the production of cannabis, although it has offered to fast-track the research and testing in this area. As of yet, no state, including our own, has accepted the EPA's offer. Cannabis, as a federally prohibited product, has no established guidelines for determining safe pesticide levels.

Dr. Jeff Duchin, King County's public-health officer, has said, "Because marijuana is often smoked or vaped and little is known about the effects of inhaled pesticides, it is important to learn more about the health effects of pesticide exposure both through inhalation as well as through ingestion of marijuana products."

King County government is limited by state law, so our communities have to rely on the LCB and other state agencies to ensure safety for cannabis consumers and patients. Nevertheless, I am requesting Public Health — Seattle and King County to adopt a resolution calling on the state to enforce regulation and protect our citizens. I urge us all to call upon Gov. Jay Inslee to make it a priority that state agencies research and then establish the safest standards for pesticides and cannabis — taking the EPA up on its offer to assist — and then fully and uniformly enforce these standards.

The health of our citizens, including kids like Cynthia, remains in the balance. We can and must do better.

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