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MAMA crusade urges clear-eyed look at crutches, cures

By John Young

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WACO, Texas — She's an anti-drug abuse crusader who also crusades for legal medical use of marijuana. She's an anti-drug abuse crusader who calls for a re-examination of the nation's get-tough drug laws.

Every day of Sandee Burbank's life is a campaign against drug abuse. But every day she also lashes out at the way society tries to deal with drugs, the legal kind and the illegal kind.

Just say no? Don't be ridiculous, says Sandee Burbank. For as "no, no" is on most parents' lips, "yes, yes" is in their eyes in how they deal with drugs in general, particularly alcohol.

She says common-sense stewardship by parents is the key to common sense about drugs by young people. Until parents fully understand the drug culture they inhabit, replete with Madison Avenue huckstering, they will have trouble getting ahead of the curve on influences that make people slaves of their urges.

Burbank in 1982 founded Mothers Against Misuse and Abuse — MAMA. It is one of the few anti-drug abuse organizations willing put all drugs, legal and illegal, into one kettle for inspection.

The nation is outraged by the deaths of 10,000 Americans a year from illegal drugs. MAMA asks for comparable alarm over the 400,000 killed each year by tobacco, 135,000 by alcohol (drunk driving not included), and, estimated by a recent study from the University of Toronto, 102,000 killed by the side effects of prescription medicine — appropriately administered, legally approved.

Know your prescription

On the issue of prescription drugs, the MAMA mantra is "ask your pharmacist." Understand what's in your prescription. Put the brand name out of your mind and know the drug. Know the side effects. Know about correct dosage. Know how drugs interact. Ask. And be skeptical.

Burbank said that like most consumers, physicians can fall prey to marketing ploys for hot new products. Patients can end up in valleys of pharmaceutical trial and error.

The tendency is to want the instant fix, the push-button cure, which isn't always there. That attitude can translate into the habits of young people who seek instant escape, push-button pleasure.

MAMA's appeal is clear-eyed and hysteria-free. Drug abuse is drug abuse. Americans young and old are captives of merchandizing, social symbols and the age-old repulsion of the young by authority draped around hypocrisy.

TV-sanctioned abuse

Though marijuana commonly is touted as a "gateway drug" to harder stuff, MAMA directs attention to deadly abuse advertised by social habits and TV. Gateway drug? Miller Lite.

MAMA advocates that all drugs be judged by the same pharmaceutical standards, which by nature would force a re-examination of laws that put hundreds of thousands behind bars for marijuana possession. Using data from the National Institute for Drug Abuse and the University of San Francisco, MAMA offers a chart of "hazard potential" for common legal and illegal drugs. It rates alcohol as the most intoxicating, with the most severe withdrawal. It ranks nicotine first in the area of dependency. Heroin ranks high in every area. Marijuana barely ranks in any category.

MAMA isn't promoting the weed, though. To every audience of young people, Burbank warns that based on the penalties, marijuana possession can rob a teen of his or her childhood. Or an adult can lose his or her livelihood based on a drug test.

To get children past dangerous straits takes a combination of sharing and the setting of limits, said Burbank. Some parents "are trying to be their kids' best friends instead of their parents," she said.

For more information about MAMA, write 2255 State Road, Mosier, Ore., 97040. On the Internet, find it at <http://www.mamas.org>.

John Young's column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. E-mail: jyoung@mail.wacotrib.com

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