



DODGE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Dale J Schmidt Sheriff Scott Mittelstadt Chief Deputy

Drive Sober – OWI laws apply to Alcohol and Drugs

When you hear about somebody being arrested for operating while under the influence of an intoxicant (OWI), you probably immediately assume that that person was arrested because they were consuming alcohol. However, it is becoming more common for people who are arrested to have used some sort of an illegal drug or impairing prescription medication. This is becoming more and more dangerous for those operating on highways as drug use becomes more prevalent and even socially acceptable.

As a Drug Recognition Expert (DRE) I have been trained in seven different drug categories that impair a person's ability to operate a motor vehicle safely. Those seven drug categories include Central Nervous System (CNS) depressants, CNS stimulants, hallucinogens, dissociative anesthetics, inhalants, narcotic analgesics and cannabis. The most common impairing drug categories that local law enforcement see frequently are CNS depressants (i.e. antidepressants and benzodiazepines), CNS stimulants (i.e. cocaine, crack and methamphetamine), narcotic analgesics (i.e. heroin, methadone, opiate prescription painkillers) and cannabis (i.e. marijuana and other related drugs).

Because of the more common use of these drugs, the amount of drug-related OWIs that occur has increased at an alarming rate. Drug related offenses are becoming more frequent during the day rather than at night and over the weekend, as historically has been the case with alcohol related offenses. Unfortunately we are seeing more people who are using these various types of drugs before they go to work, while on break or prior to driving home from work. Furthermore, with the push for legalization of marijuana, drivers impaired by the use of marijuana fail to recognize that any amount of marijuana's active ingredient, Delta 9 THC, in their system will result in an arrest for OWI.

A couple months ago, I stopped a driver for speeding, weaving through traffic and changing lanes in a manner that was very unsafe. Upon making contact with the driver of the car, it was discovered that they had smoked marijuana prior to leaving home. This person did not recognize the fact that smoking marijuana and then driving a motor vehicle was not only illegal but also impaired their ability to drive a motor vehicle safely. To make matters worse this individual had minor children in the back seat of the car. During my conversation with this person I explained how this was a serious violation and that they placed the occupants of their car and the occupants of every other car around them in jeopardy. At the conclusion of that conversation, it was evident that the driver had never thought about marijuana impairing their ability to drive and it was as if a lightbulb came on in their head. This person was arrested for first offense OWI with a minor passenger. The minor passenger elevates this first offense to a crime in Wisconsin.

In writing this month's column it is not my intent to spur the debate over the legalization of these drugs, however, it is my intent to highlight that regardless of one's opinions on the use of drugs, their impairing properties do still exist. It is imperative that when individuals make the choice to use these impairing drugs that they also take personal responsibility for their actions following such use. I have personally been to far too many fatal crashes in which alcohol, illegal drugs and prescription medications have been a contributing factor to the crash. I implore those that use these impairing substances to never get behind the wheel of a motor vehicle as that decision may lead to not only an arrest, but also may lead to serious injury or fatal consequences. Please remember to always drive sober so that together we can keep Dodge County a safe place to live, work and visit.

Sheriff Dale J. Schmidt