‘Dabbing’ exploding, reaching new highs

By Owen Boss

The “dabbing” toking trend sweeping the nation — where highly concentrated doses of cannabis are vaporized — is causing overdoses and triggering explosions, worrying even a top pro-pot advocate.

“It’s too strong. I’ve seen experienced users overdose and pass out,” said Dale Gieringer, who earned his Ph.D. from Stanford University on drug regulation. “It’s a phenomenon one sees only with dabbing.”

Gieringer, who is on the board of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), said mostly younger stoners aren’t heeding the warning.

“I know people who have fallen on the floor and broken their teeth” after overdosing, he told the Herald last night. “But some people still insist on it. You can get a very intense rush. You better sit down.”

Dabbing, which refers to smoking a highly concentrated dose of cannabis extract, packs a powerful punch that even casual pot smokers may find unpleasant, said Kevin Hill, director of the Substance Abuse Consultation Service at McLean Hospital in Belmont.

“While concentrates may produce a stronger high, they also are more likely to produce adverse effects like anxiety or paranoia,” Hill said. “Any of the side effects associated with marijuana — anxiety, paranoia, sometimes vomiting — seem more likely to occur with concentrates.”

But it’s how the chemicals are being extracted with butane that has fire chiefs sounding the alarm.

“Howling and storing the amount of butane that is necessary to accomplish this process in a residential environment is hazardous,” state fire Marshal Peter J. Ostroskey said. “You can get a pretty significant explosion even from a small amount.”

Recent near-fatal hash oil lab explosions in Tewksbury and South Hadley, Ostroskey said, show how the latest pot-smoking trend can quickly take a catastrophic turn.

Tewksbury firefighters responding to a March 2014 house explosion on Astle Street found three residents so badly burned that they needed to be rushed to the hospital by helicopter, fire Chief Michael Hazel said.

“The force of that explosion dislodged the walls and roof structure of the house,” Hazel recalled. “It was caused by a lack of knowledge of what they were doing.”
The next summer in South Hadley, a wannabe dab-cooker was arrested after leaving the finished product — commonly referred to as "wax," "honey" or "shatter" — in a fridge, where the off-gasses built up to the point where fire Capt. Jim Pula said the appliance turned into a "bomb" that nearly leveled the house.

“Butane off-fumes left in a confined area are going to explode," Pula said. “And if it explodes, and someone happens to be in the area, they can easily be killed.”

The increasing concern over butane hash oil labs comes as the Rhode Island U.S. Attorney’s Office announced federal charges last week against five people accused of running dabbing operations, one of whom is being blamed for a July 2015 explosion in South Kingstown that killed a 27-year-old man.