

Medicinal use of marijuana inconsistent



George McMahon, the first Iowan to use marijuana legally, suffers from a disease that deteriorates bones and joints.

Some Iowans who are ill can't get drug

3/22/92 p. 1B

By **KEN FUSON**

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Ottosen, Ia. — Barbara Douglass and Ladd Huffman live 30 miles apart — she in Storm Lake, he in Calumet.

Both have multiple sclerosis.

Both asked the federal government for permission to legally smoke marijuana.

Douglass, 35, was approved. The government sends her marijuana cigarettes.

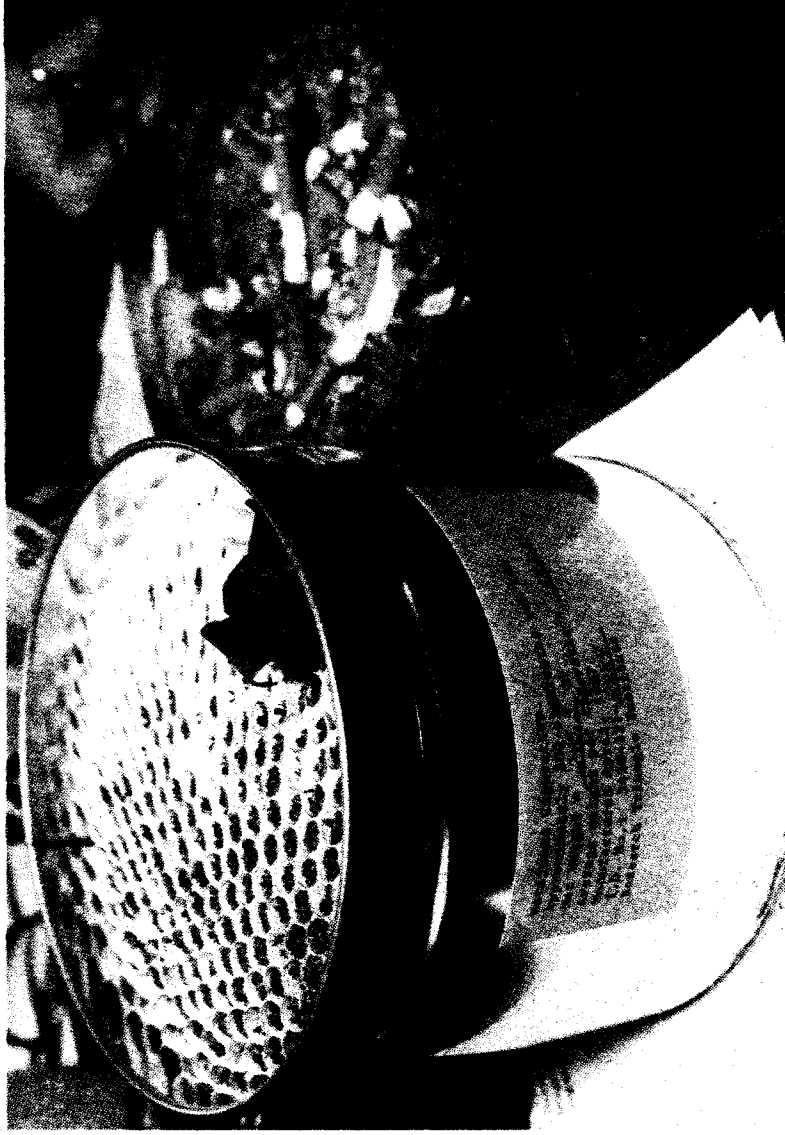
Huffman, 42, also was approved — in March. But he never received any marijuana and was notified 10 days ago that he wouldn't.

If that sounds confusing, then you can partly appreciate the frustration felt by Huffman and other chronically ill people who say the U.S. government is prohibiting them from getting the medicine that helps most — marijuana.

"Essentially, we're victims, but they're making us criminals," Huffman says.

Outrage

Two recent government rulings have outraged those who advocate providing marijuana to the chronically ill. They say otherwise honest people and their



This canister contains 300 marijuana cigarettes of Barbara Douglass of Storm Lake, rettes when full. Dated 1987, it is the prescription of Barbara Douglass of Storm Lake, who has multiple sclerosis.

loved ones are being forced to break the law and buy the drug on the street.

First, the Public Health Service decided not to provide marijuana for 28 people — including Huffman — who had already been approved for its use. It would continue supplying the drug to 13 people — including Douglass — who already were getting it.

Then Robert C. Bonner, chief of the Drug Enforcement Agency, repeated the agency's opposition to allowing physicians to pre-

scribe the drug. In strong language, he said the medical benefits of marijuana have never been proved.

Living Proof

"Beyond doubt, the claims that marijuana is medicine are false, dangerous and cruel," he said. "Sick men, women and children can be fooled by these claims and experiment with the drug. Instead of being helped, they risk serious side effects."

Marijuana advocates say there

are thousands of people with cancer, glaucoma, multiple sclerosis and AIDS who are living proof that Bonner is wrong.

They say the drug helps cancer patients handle chemotherapy treatments, helps glaucoma patients retain their sight, helps multiple sclerosis patients get muscle spasms under control and helps AIDS patients gain weight.

Doctors know it, they say. A Harvard University study found

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that nearly half of the 2,400 doctors surveyed would prescribe marijuana if they could.

Legislators know it, they say. Thirty-five states have recognized the medical value of marijuana.

Beneficial

Even the U.S. government knows it, advocates say. They say other departments in other agencies have found marijuana to be beneficial to the chronically ill.

"It's an outrageous situation," says Alice O'Leary, executive secretary of the Alliance for Cannabis Therapeutics. "We have a war on drugs going on and nobody is against that.

"But you can't sacrifice the seriously ill on the altar of drug abuse. They've put these people in the crossfire on the war on drugs."

Consider Huffman's case. A veteran of the Vietnam War, the 6-foot-5 man now sits in a wheelchair, disabled by multiple sclerosis. He says he began smoking marijuana when nothing else would ease his symptoms.

"I tried every alternative the doctors had and none of them worked," he says. "But marijuana worked."

Probation

In July 1990, he was charged with drug possession for growing marijuana in his home. He was sentenced to two years probation. A judge told Huffman that if he is caught with marijuana again, he will go to jail.

He then sought the government's permission to legally smoke marijuana. Permission granted. Then the government changed its mind. Permission denied.

"I don't show my anger," he says. "I'm just to the point that there's nothing I can do anymore.

I've been waiting all summer for the marijuana to come. I've lost my temper and everything else, but it hasn't done any good."

Bill Grigg, a spokesman for the Public Health Service, which oversees the marijuana program nationally, said officials there decided to review the program after dozens of AIDS patients began requesting the drug.

Pill with Ingredient

The conclusion: Other alternatives, such as a pill that contains an ingredient found in marijuana, are better. With AIDS patients, "we might be doing them some irreparable harm" by prescribing marijuana, he said.

"The thought now is that there are better and safer ways to do those things," he says.

George McMahon disagrees. McMahon, 41, suffers from nail-patella syndrome, a rare disease that causes steady deterioration of bones, joints and organs. He was the first Iowan to use marijuana legally and, with Douglass, represents two of the 13 people in the country still allowed to use it.

Every so often, McMahon, who lives between Ottosen and Bode, in north-central Iowa, goes to his pharmacist, who hands him a metal container not unlike those that mothers use to send cookies to college students. Inside, as tightly packed as a honeycomb, are hundreds of marijuana cigarettes. The prescription allows him to smoke 10 a day.

"It's Not the Same"

"If it wasn't for this, I'd be in a hospital bed," he says. "And the pills don't work the same. It's not the same thing and it doesn't have the same effect."

Says Douglass: "It turns you into a zombie." Five years ago, Douglass might have joined the skeptics who wonder how marijuana helps and why it's necessary.

"I did not believe in marijuana," she says. "Only hippies smoked pot. Only bad people smoked pot.

That's what I thought."

Then, in March 1988, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She endured muscle spasms. A friend told her that marijuana would help.

"I didn't believe it," she says.

She was approved for the government program. But she believes the six-month delay between approval and actually getting the drug caused her to go legally blind.

Medicating

When she and others smoke marijuana, they don't call it "getting high." They call it "medicating myself."

"It's my medicine," Douglass says. "When you're doing something to try to make you feel better, you're not that guy out there 'copping a buzz.'"

But what would she think if her 16-year-old daughter started smoking it?

"She's healthy," Douglass replies. "She doesn't need it."

McMahon worries that the government will stop the program entirely, leaving him and Douglass with the same alternative that other families have — the street.

Like the couple in northern Iowa. Multiple sclerosis confines the wife to a wheelchair. About a year ago, her weight decreased. Loved ones thought she might die.

Her husband bought some marijuana.

"It's the only thing that's given her any comfort," he says. "She's gaining weight. She doesn't suffer from dizziness. She's not going blind like I thought she was. I feel like in the last year she's been in a state of remission."

But every time she needs more, he risks going to jail. In slow, measured words, his wife explains their frustration:

"A bunch of healthy people are thinking they know what's best for us. How do they know?"



BOB MODERSOHN/THE REGISTER

Ladd Huffman of Calumet has multiple sclerosis but does not have legal permission to smoke marijuana.