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Time for conversation about medical marijuana

The Register's editorial

Iowa is about to explore whether sick residents should be allowed to use marijuana to treat health problems, including pain and nausea. The Iowa Board of Pharmacy, which regulates pharmacy practices and the distribution of prescription drugs, has voted unanimously to hold public hearings around the state.

Though the Iowa Legislature would have to approve any changes to the law regarding the medical use of marijuana, the pharmacy board deserves credit for initiating a statewide conversation.

Iowans should pay attention and get involved. The meetings are this state's opportunity to examine the scientific research and opinions. This matters because at the end of the day, the use of marijuana for medical purposes isn't about being "soft on drugs" or catering to those who think it's their "right" to smoke marijuana.

It's a medical issue.

The federal government treated marijuana use as a medical issue in 1978 when it established a program to allow people with certain medical conditions to use it. In 1992 it closed the program to new applicants, but Iowan George McMahon is one of the few remaining Americans still participating.

McMahon is afflicted with Nail Patella Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that causes abnormalities of joints, kidneys and bones. For nearly 20 years, McMahon has been using marijuana daily to control pain, spasms and nausea. He told the Register no prescription drug worked as well as marijuana.

Iowans should hear from him and others who use the drug as treatment.

The pharmacy board should also invite people from outside the state to add to the conversation. Iowa doesn't have to reinvent the wheel on this issue when 13 other states have legalized marijuana for medical use. This state should find out more about their experiences, including what medical conditions the drug is used for and whether decriminalization increased illegal use.

People with objections should also come forward. Opponents to the legalization of marijuana say it could open the door for more recreational use of the drug.

And the board should examine the plethora of studies - including information from the Institute of Medicine and the World Health Organization - on medical use of the drug.

Lawmakers should attend. Responsible for any changes in the law regarding the drug, they should become educated, and listen to their constituents. In the end, though, the decision can't be a popularity contest. It should be based on whether the medical benefit outweighs the potential problems with making marijuana available as a prescription drug.

Last legislative session, state Sen. Joe Bolkcom (D-Iowa City) heard from Iowans when he proposed legislation calling for the creation of "compassion centers." The nonprofit organizations would cultivate and distribute the drug to approved patients. The bill died due to lack of support, but several Iowans shared their stories in a subcommittee hearing. Bolkcom said some wanted to try the drug for pain relief, but were afraid of getting in trouble. Others expressed concerns about where legalization could lead.

Now a broader conversation can ensue in communities around the state. Not mired down in the politics of the Statehouse. Not dominated by a narrow constituency. A conversation focused on medical treatment and science and the societal impact of legalizing a drug that may alleviate pain and discomfort for sick Iowans.

That's a conversation worth having.

Additional Facts

The judge's order

Iowa law considers marijuana a Schedule I controlled substance, putting it among the most tightly regulated drugs under state law. That categorization was challenged in a recent lawsuit, which argued the drug did not meet the statutory requirement of having "no accepted medical use treatment in the United States." In April, a Polk County judge ordered the Iowa Board of Pharmacy to examine whether the drug is properly classified - which ultimately raised questions the board considered serious enough to explore through public meetings.

Dates to come

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy plans to hold public meetings in Des Moines, Iowa City, Council Bluffs and Mason City. Dates and details will be posted soon at www.iowa.gov/ibpe.
