

Decriminalize marijuana for medical use (Globe Gazette editorial)

Iowa's lawmakers must do the compassionate thing and legalize marijuana for medical use. This drug is no cure-all, but there has been enough tested research detailing its benefits to convince us that it has positive health benefits and a legitimate place in a patient's spectrum of care.

What ultimately sold us was the testimony of those who spoke Wednesday at the medical marijuana hearing sponsored by the Iowa Pharmacy Board.

The folks who stood up weren't looking for a loophole to legitimize their habit. These were multiple sclerosis patients who had found symptom relief and sufferers of chronic nausea who finally had a way to enjoy a meal like other people. These were real people who had found real solutions to health problems which in some cases had dogged them for years.

What makes marijuana so attractive as a remedy? The presence of THC, a substance which appears to have a palliative effect on the symptoms of many illnesses and medical conditions. The drug is used to reduce pain and muscle spasms, relieve nausea and increase appetite. It's won converts from the ranks of cancer patients and those who suffer from HIV/AIDS.

There are legal drugs which do what pot does. What none of these drugs can offer is one-size-fits-all relief. Medical marijuana is simply another choice. By giving people this choice we strengthen the cause of letting individuals direct their own health care.

Let us be clear: We are not advocating a reefer free-for-all. Medical marijuana should be available by doctor's recommendation only. Possession otherwise should be a criminal offense. Impaired driving laws should still apply as well.

Smoked marijuana need not be the only choice. It works well in edible form, too (don't pretend you didn't know that). Some places in California — where medical marijuana is legal — even sell product mixed with salad dressing.

Medical marijuana's detractors have to realize that the arc of public opinion has changed. Thirteen states offer varying forms of legal protection for medical marijuana users. Another 13 state legislatures (including those of Iowa, Illinois, Missouri and Minnesota) have discussed the matter within the last year. Petition drives in Florida and South Dakota are focused on putting legalization to a vote. This is happening, whether we want it to or not.

Set aside for a moment the considerations of medicinal value and patients' rights to think of the potential positive benefits legalization would bring to our farmers, businesses and research institutions. Should Iowa try to position itself in the vanguard of a new agricultural trend? If we feed the nation, can't we also try to provide comfort for those who seek it? We believe the answer to both questions is yes.

We realize that legalization would take an act of tremendous political courage by our lawmakers. We suspect that Iowa's 2010 election campaign will be a cut-and-thrust affair. Fights over the economy and same-sex marriage will leave little room or energy for a debate about the partial decriminalization of marijuana.

But for us it still goes back to those people who shared their stories on Wednesday. They seek nothing more than to improve the quality of their lives. Marijuana offers them a way to do that. Who are we to say no?

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