

## **Editorial: Legalize Medical Marijuana**

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We've all seen the images and heard the testimony of ailing Americans who gain relief from their chronic pain or discomfort by smoking marijuana -- who, in fact, have no other remedy at their disposal. People can't help chuckling over pictures of grandmoms and granddads smoking a "j" -- Cheech and Chong they're not. But of course there's nothing funny about these sufferers' need for medical marijuana -- for marijuana that has been prescribed for them by a doctor -- or the federal government's unmerciful threat to prosecute users even in states where it is not against the law.

Since a 2006 Supreme Court ruling against people who use prescription pot, numerous states have passed bills protecting them from prosecution. In states that do allow it -- with New Mexico's recent passing of what Gov. Bill Richardson called "a humane piece of legislation," there are now 12 -- the federal government generally does not look to arrest anyone on an individual basis.

Efforts to get such a bill through the Illinois General Assembly have been bumpy: one step forward and two steps back. But with the shift in power in Springfield and Majority Whip Sen. Donne E. Trotter (D-Chicago) signed on as chief co-sponsor, there is optimism that a bill introduced by Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago) will be approved. We urge his colleagues to pass it.

Far from opening the door to decriminalizing marijuana, the bill allows its use only by people afflicted with cancer, glaucoma, positive HIV status or hepatitis C or who are "diagnosed by a physician as having a debilitating medical condition" accompanied by severe symptoms. The patient and one primary caregiver would be issued a registry identification card by the Department of Public Health to permit them to possess a limited amount of cannabis in plant or usable form, and to grow it in "an indoor locked facility." Only regulated nonprofit corporations could be licensed to grow marijuana.

Would there be abuses of the system? Most likely. But tight controls will keep them to a minimum, and they are worth tolerating if it means all those suffering from glaucoma and MS will be able to reduce their pain, if cancer patients will be able to alleviate their nausea or vomiting, if AIDS patients will be able to regain their appetite. Medical marijuana is just that: medicine. Denying it to the sick borders on cruelty.

This reflects the consensus of Sun-Times News Group newspapers.