

Medical Marijuana Bill Passes Committee

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March 7, 2007
The News-Gazette

SPRINGFIELD — Patients suffering from multiple sclerosis, cancer and other chronic diseases would be able to treat their symptoms with marijuana under legislation the Senate public health committee approved on Tuesday.

Under SB 650, doctors would recommend medical marijuana patients to the Illinois Department of Human Services, which would issue special cards protecting them from arrest, prosecution, criminal or civil penalty and disciplinary action by a professional licensing board.

Qualifying patients and their caregivers would be allowed to possess up to 2.5 ounces of marijuana and up to 12 cannabis plants, which must be grown in a locked indoor facility. But abusing that qualification would bring tougher penalties than current state law provides for marijuana use and possession.

State Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago, the chief sponsor, said the bill is not intended to legalize marijuana for everyone, despite perceptions to the contrary.

"It's a very compassionate, tightly drafted bill," he said.

Illinois law enforcement groups are opposed, saying the measure would be difficult to enforce and could make the drug more accessible to young people.

"It opens the door wide open to all kinds of problems," said Limey Nargelenas, spokesman for the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police.

But Julie Falco, a multiple sclerosis patient who testified before the committee, said eating marijuana brownies three times a day has made a "profound difference" in her quality of life, and she and other patients should be able to use the drug legally.

"Potential treatment should not be withheld for other than viable medical reasons," she said.

Six members of the committee agreed with her, but four voted no, including state Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon, and state Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington. The bill now heads to the full Senate for consideration.

Eleven other states have similar laws on the books, but they can be overruled by federal regulations banning marijuana for medical use.