

POSTED ON NOVEMBER 8, 2007:

Nature's medicine?

Illinois may debate medical marijuana again next year

By **R. L. Nave**

Grafton resident Jamie Clayton participated in a study from 2003 to 2005 with 50 others suffering from peripheral neuropathy, a painful nerve disorder that often affects people with HIV/AIDS.

According to the researchers, patients who smoked three marijuana cigarettes each day for one week reported a decrease in pain.

"I was amazed at the benefit," Clayton says.

Not only did the marijuana help ease the discomfort, but Clayton, 51, also gained 10 pounds when his appetite increased, and he was able to rely less on heavier painkillers. Now back in Illinois, which passed one of the nation's first medical-marijuana laws but failed to implement it, Clayton must now settle for a prescription for Marinol — an FDA-approved marijuana substitute that contains THC — whose effect he describes as minimal.

Clayton, who doesn't support the legalization of recreational marijuana use, quietly lobbied state legislators this past year to support a measure that would have decriminalized the use of cannabis for people with certain illnesses. But, on a mostly party-line vote, the bill — sponsored by state Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago — failed to even to pass out of the Senate.

"The fact that it got a floor vote was a huge step forward for us," says Dan Bernath, a spokesman for the Marijuana Policy Project, based in Washington, D.C.

Bernath says he expects legislation to be reintroduced in the Legislature in 2008, although he doesn't yet know who might sponsor the new bill. It's unclear whether the bill will gain traction during a campaign year when it was unsuccessful during an election off-year.

As part of the effort to educate the public before the medical-marijuana issue is revisited during the next legislative session, several groups have organized free statewide screenings of a documentary that explores the marijuana-as-medicine controversy.

Partially funded by the Legislature-supported Illinois Humanities Council, the film, *Waiting to Inhale*, will be shown in six cities across the state starting this week. The Springfield screening takes place at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 14, at the Hoogland Center for the Arts, 420 S. Sixth St. The film's director, Jed Riffe, will moderate a panel discussion immediately after the screening.

Marijuana was legal in the U.S. from 1860 to 1937 and until the 1940s was included in the *U.S. Pharmacopeia*, a listing of drugs published by the organization of the same name, which sets quality standards for drugs approved in this country. Illinois' medical-marijuana bill has been on the books since 1978. A dozen other states — Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington — have also passed medical-marijuana laws.

U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., also interviewed for *Waiting*, says that marijuana has been stigmatized mostly for its cultural implications: its association with African-American jazz musicians and young hippies.

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s reinvigorated the discussion of medical marijuana. HIV/AIDS patients discovered that marijuana was effective in combating symptoms of AIDS, including nausea, appetite loss, pain, and depression.

"The activist community — that had at first been gay activists, then AIDS activists — some of them became marijuana activists," says Dr. Donald Abrams, who oversaw the University of California, San Francisco, study in which Clayton participated.

Advocates for medical cannabis use point to scientific studies demonstrating that several of the 60-or-so chemicals called cannabinoids contained in marijuana, including THC, can relieve symptoms and chronic pain associated with HIV/AIDS, glaucoma, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, cancer, and other disorders characterized by nausea and spastic muscles.

"I've discovered that a few tokes and the spasticity just calms right down," says Yvonne Westbrook, a multiple sclerosis patient featured in the film.

Dr. Christopher Fichtner, a University of Chicago psychiatry professor and former mental-health director for the Illinois Department of Human Services, says that the medical-marijuana debate has turned into a battle over states' rights.

John Walker, director of the Illinois Compassion Action Network, says that even though lawmakers have been slow to respond, most citizens support medical marijuana. As evidence, his group cites a 2002 Harris Interactive poll showing support from 80 percent of people nationwide for medical marijuana.

Walker concedes that passing a medical-cannabis law will be difficult during an important election year, but he says that his aim is to teach people about the medical benefits of marijuana.

"We're still reeling from defeat, but certainly we wouldn't want to sit and do nothing next year," he says.

"A lot of times, people hear the word 'marijuana' and they giggle. We need to reframe the debate and educate people."

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