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## No good reasons to continue ban on medical marijuana

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"I am not a criminal — I am sick."

Gretchen Steele of Coulterville was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis seven years ago. She is one of thousands of Illinois residents who has been unable to find relief through conventional medications, but whose pain can be relieved by marijuana.

Unfortunately, the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes is illegal in Illinois, but lawmakers have an opportunity this session to do the right thing for people such as Steele and Lisa Lange Van Camp of Lindenhurst, who suffers from severe osteoarthritis associated with Dercum's disease.

It's about time.

Van Camp and Steele are the real-life stories medical marijuana proponents are telling in an effort to get lawmakers to make Illinois the 13th state to allow seriously and terminally ill patients to use marijuana for medical purposes with their doctors' approval.

There are two bills in the General Assembly, House Bill 5938 and Senate Bill 2865, that would protect patients who use marijuana with a doctor's recommendation from arrest and jail.

Last week a Senate committee approved the legislation, but it's too early to hope the full Senate and House also will approve it. A similar bill failed last year in the Senate 29-22. The lone Republican to vote for the measure was Sen. Dave Syverson, R-Rockford.

"I was convinced it was worth trying if people are in pain and they believe it helps," Syverson said. "Why should I not allow them to at least have this as an option? I know there are new drugs out that can address most of concerns and maybe for some marijuana is only psychosomatic, but if it helps, why not?"

"I also know other states have had some problems. However, I think the bill we passed last year addressed most of those issues — took what worked and changed what didn't."

The legislation sets out specific parameters. The program would be administered by the Illinois Department of Public Health and patients would need written certification from a doctor. It also limits the amount of marijuana a patient can possess and includes other restrictions.

Marijuana can be harmful if abused, but so can any prescription drug. You don't have to look too far to see cases of high-profile people who abused prescription drugs such as OxyContin and Vicodin.

Medical marijuana has its critics. People say there are other drugs that address the symptoms marijuana is said to relieve. Medications work differently on different people, however. It should be up to the patient and the doctor to decide what works best for the individual.

Syverson said he took some heat because of his stand on the issue. This year he should be encouraged by a poll released Monday that shows 68 percent of Illinoisans support medical marijuana. In the Rock River Valley, 65 percent support it.

The poll, by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc of Washington, D.C., was released Monday by the Washington-based Marijuana Policy Project. National polls show even more support for medical marijuana. A 2005 Gallup Poll showed 78 percent in favor.

The poll shows Republicans are less likely to support the issue (54 percent), but one of the leading conservatives of our time favored medical marijuana.

"It is terrifying and humiliating to remind ourselves that ten thousand people every week are arrested for marijuana handling because legislators do not pause over evidence as readily obtainable as is now," the recently deceased William F. Buckley said in a Dec. 8, 1997, column in National Review.

He also wrote about the issue on June 7, 2005:

"(Drug Czar John) Walters takes the position that it is not medically established that marijuana uniquely grants such relief as is being touted. Nothing is more infuriating to a person who has been relieved of crippling nausea than to be told that he has not been relieved. ...

"These (Bush administration hard-liners) — in particular John P. Walters, the drug czar — are relying on dogmatic positions which especially outrage those who have had relief from marijuana during their illnesses."

Illness knows no party lines or political ideology. Patients should be able to get marijuana with their doctors' approval without being treated like criminals.

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