

## **Editorial: Truth and Medical Marijuana**

February 24, 2007  
Chicago Tribune

Medical marijuana has had a lot of successes. Eleven states have legalized the therapeutic use of cannabis for people whose doctors think they can benefit from it. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the right of physicians to recommend pot to their patients. A 1999 report by the federal government's Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded, "Scientific data indicate the potential therapeutic value of cannabinoid drugs, primarily THC, for pain relief, control of nausea and vomiting, and appetite stimulation."

But elsewhere, medical marijuana has stalled. Most states still don't allow it, and even in those that do, federal laws still ban the possession of cannabis. That means sick people who need marijuana for symptoms that don't respond to approved drugs must either do without or risk going to jail. Despite the IOM's call for more research, studies have been few and far between. As a result, the therapeutic value of cannabis remains largely unknown and untapped.

Recently, there were a couple of advances that may help to erode the federal government's stubborn resistance. The first was a study in the journal *Neurology* that found smoking pot can relieve pain — including a condition found in AIDS victims that is often impervious to other pain drugs, even powerful opiates. Said Donald Abrams, a physician and professor at the University of California, San Francisco, "There is a measurable medical benefit to smoking cannabis for these patients."

But such research is hard to come by. That's because the federal government is the only legal source of marijuana for clinical studies, and its monopoly presents some serious problems.

One is that it often rejects applications by scientists seeking supplies for their research. Another is that those who do get the stuff find its quality to be unreliable. By contrast, the government allows licensed private laboratories to supply such drugs as heroin and cocaine for scientific investigations.

An administrative law judge for the Drug Enforcement Administration recently ruled that a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst should be allowed to grow marijuana in a licensed facility. Judge Mary Ellen Bittner found that some reputable scientists have been denied access to the government's supply and that providing an alternative source "would be in the public interest."

Whether that decision will actually change anything remains to be seen, since the DEA has the option of rejecting her recommendation. That would be a shame. If the government is so sure that marijuana has no medical value, it should welcome this sort of research. If it refuses to facilitate such studies, it must fear knowing the truth.