

NEWS

ELDERS BACKS RIGHT TO PRESCRIBE MARIJUANA

Future surgeon general labels ban "almost criminal."

BY MARA LEVERITT

Dr. Joycelyn Elders, whom President-elect Bill Clinton has tapped as the country's next surgeon general, has told the *Arkansas Times* that she fully supports physicians' right to prescribe marijuana in the treatment of disease.

"If the doctor feels that this is an appropriate medication for his patients to use," Elders said, "I would very much support that medication being available."

Marijuana is widely acknowledged to be helpful in the treatment of a number of medical conditions such as glaucoma, nausea resulting from chemotherapy, epileptic convulsions and muscle spasms caused by multiple sclerosis.

AIDS sufferers have reported that the drug enhances their appetites, making it easier to keep weight on and to resist the syndrome's devastating "wasting effect."

But federal regulations define marijuana as a drug "with no accepted medical value in treatment." Research into uses of the drug has been limited. And recent rulings by the U.S. Public Health Service have made it almost impossible for doctors to prescribe the plant, despite pleas from doctors and patients, and mounting evidence that marijuana can provide important relief.

"I think it's almost criminal to not allow use of something that could alleviate suffering," Elders said in an interview days before it was disclosed that she and Clinton had discussed the surgeon general's job. The *Times* subsequently confirmed before the official announcement that she intended to accept the job.

Mayflower, an advocate of patients' right to have access to the drug. After the meeting, Smith said Elders told him she "supported the use of medical marijuana from both a



NEW ATTITUDE: Dr. Joycelyn Elders sees "critical" need for change in marijuana policy.

policy and a personal standpoint," and that anything she told him in their private meeting she would "be willing to say on TV."

When she was contacted after the meeting with Smith, Elders confirmed that she had told him she sees "the need" for physician access to the drug. The doctor said she did not discuss marijuana or other specific health-related issues with Clinton during her Dec. 9 conversation with him, but added that if she did accept a federal post, she would consider reversing current policy on the medical use

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She had met with Clinton the day before the *Times* interview to discuss her possible role in the new administration. Even so, the physician minced no words when asked about what would amount to a profound reversal of current policy.

"We prescribe morphine for pain," she said, "and I think doctors should be able to prescribe marijuana as well, if they feel it's medically called for." She described present regulations blocking medical access to marijuana as "something that we need to work to get changed."

The post of surgeon general will provide Elders a national platform from which to make that point. It already appears likely that Elders will be as outspoken an activist in Washington on matters that concern her as she has been throughout her career in Arkansas.

The matter of marijuana use in medicine was brought to Elders' attention in a meeting she had last week with Sam Smith of



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of marijuana a priority.

"I think that would really be very important," she said, "very critical."

Despite the radical change Elders' comments reflect from the current policies of the Bush administration, the use of marijuana is not considered a radical form of treatment by many physicians.

In a poll of cancer specialists conducted by Harvard University in 1990, 55 percent of the respondents said they found marijuana safe and effective. Sixty-nine percent reported they had discussed the medical use of marijuana with their patients. And 44 percent said they had recommended use of the drug to patients, even if it had to be acquired illegally. 