



August 20, 2009

Board hears stances on medical marijuana

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Medical-marijuana proponents pleaded with state regulators Wednesday to stop treating Iowa patients like criminals for using the drug to combat pain and other ailments.

"People are suffering who need not suffer. People are rotting in jail who should not be there," said Kevin Feeley of Ames, who said marijuana has helped ease his suffering from spinal cancer.

Feeley and other speakers at the State Historical Building told the Iowa Pharmacy Board that marijuana is a safer, less addictive treatment than many prescription medications. They urged regulators to help Iowa join 13 other states in which patients are allowed to use marijuana with a doctor's approval.

Wednesday was the first of four hearings around the state to gather views on the subject. The pharmacy board plans to make a recommendation to the Legislature this winter.

Feeley told the board he lost 100 pounds because of nausea caused by cancer drugs, and he was incapacitated by pain. Marijuana helped him eat, sleep and return to work, he said.

His wife, Amanda Feeley, said her husband's condition worsened when he stopped using marijuana because of fears that he would be arrested.

She tearfully recalled seeing him doubled up on the floor in front of their four children. "I couldn't sit and watch him starve to death," she said. "I took matters into my own hands and did what I had to do, because I needed my husband back and my children needed a father."

Feeley said she contacted a friend, who helped her obtain marijuana.

Most of Wednesday's speakers favored legalizing medical marijuana. They said it could help countless patients suffering from a range of illnesses, including AIDS, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, glaucoma, epilepsy, chronic pain and anxiety.

Some spoke of marijuana as a gift from God, and they suggested that opposition is partly rooted in drug companies' profit motives.

Robert Manke of Des Moines told regulators he's used marijuana to counter painful injuries caused by traffic accidents and nausea caused by prescription medications.

"I know what it's like to crawl around on the bathroom floor like an animal in the morning, vomiting with my head in the stool," he said. "I need your help. I'm not here because I want to get high. I'm here because I want to stop being sick. And I want to stop being persecuted."

Several physicians joined patients in supporting the idea. One was Dr. Edward Hertko, a retired West Des Moines physician, who said marijuana is less dangerous and addictive than many prescription drugs.

Hertko said the medical-marijuana discussion had nothing to do with drug users who simply want to get high. "The people who want recreational marijuana already know how to get it," he said.

Gary Young, a retired Polk County environmental health official, was in the minority when he spoke against medical marijuana.

Young was representing the Iowa Elks Association, which is concerned that legalization of marijuana for medical uses could make it easier for people, including minors, to obtain it for recreational uses.

Young countered proponents' studies with references to studies that found no medical benefit. He said prescription medications are purer and easier to control than smoked marijuana, which he said has hundreds of chemicals that vary in strength.

"I urge the board to make its decision on scientific evidence and not on anecdotal evidence," he said.

The pharmacy board will consider how it would regulate medical distribution of marijuana if the state allowed it.

One way would be to allow sales only through licensed pharmacies. A vice president of the Iowa Pharmacy Association told the board that the group would support experiments in which pharmacies would sell the drug to people who had doctors' prescriptions for it.

Additional Facts

More hearings

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy plans three more hearings on medical marijuana. The schedule:

SEPT. 2: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Music Man Square, Mason City

OCT. 7: Noon to 7 p.m., Bowen Science Building, University of Iowa, Iowa City

NOV. 4: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Harrah's Casino and Hotel, Council Bluffs
