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## Pharmacy board postpones vote on the medical use of marijuana

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State regulators have delayed a recommendation on allowing medical-marijuana use because Iowans have swamped them with opinions on the controversial issue.

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy planned to vote this month on whether to recommend that the Legislature legalize marijuana use for medical problems. But the board announced Monday that it wouldn't make the decision until Feb. 17, when it will hold a special meeting in Des Moines.

Executive Director Lloyd Jessen said board members must read through 12,000 pages of written comments.

"Since the board members are volunteers who have full-time jobs, and since the marijuana project is in addition to their regular duties as board members, they need additional time to complete this task," he said in an e-mail.

The written comments were in addition to the scores of live comments the board heard this fall in a series of hearings around the state. Most of those witnesses favored medical marijuana. The written comments have not been collated yet, Jessen said.

Advocates want Iowa to join 13 other states in allowing patients with certain chronic problems, such as cancer or multiple sclerosis, to use marijuana if they receive approval from a doctor or other qualified medical professional. Opponents see the effort as a back-door way to legalize marijuana for recreational use.

The Feb. 17 meeting date would give legislators just six weeks to consider the controversial issue before their scheduled adjournment March 31. A leading proponent in the Legislature said even without that time crunch, he doubted lawmakers would approve medical marijuana this year.

Sen. Joe Bolkcom said he remains optimistic Iowa eventually will legalize the practice. The Iowa City Democrat sponsored a bill last year that would have allowed Iowans to obtain and use marijuana for medical problems if their doctors recommended it. He said he expects more study and discussion of the issue in the legislative session that starts next month, but he doesn't expect the bill to be debated on the Senate or House floors yet.

"I'm pragmatic enough to know this is an issue that has some controversy to it, and it will take some time for advocates to get organized and make their case," he said.

One of the most vocal advocates, Carl Olsen of Des Moines, said he's encouraged that the pharmacy board is considering the issue. Olsen said he does not expect the board to back full legalization of medical marijuana. He said the board is more likely to support making it easier to do research on marijuana's usefulness for patients.

"I don't know how wonderful it will be," he said of the board's probable proposal. "But it should be better than what we've got now."

## Additional Facts

- Board meeting

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy plans to consider the issue of medical marijuana during a meeting from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Feb. 17 at the State Historical Building in Des Moines. The board plans to make a recommendation on the issue at the meeting.

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