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Iowa pharmacy board opens door for medical marijuana

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BY TONY LEYS • tleys@dmreg.com • February 17, 2010

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy voted unanimously this afternoon to recommend legislators reclassify marijuana in a way that could open the door to medical uses.

The board recommended that legislators reclassify the drug from Schedule I, for which there are no permitted uses, to Schedule II, which could allow medical uses.

The board also recommended the state set up a broad task force, including patients, medical professionals and law enforcement officers, to come up with a way to safely implement a medical marijuana program.

Marijuana proponents cheered after the vote was taken, but they acknowledged that hurdles remain before the drug could become available to patients.

"This is a big thing. This is momentum," said Carl Olsen, one of the measure's main Iowa proponents. He said he didn't expect legislators to consider the matter until next year's legislative session.

The vote came after a morning of discussion in which the six board members appeared split on whether medical marijuana would be a good idea.

Vice Chairwoman Susan Frey, a Villisca pharmacist, said marijuana clearly has benefits for some patients. But she said current pharmaceutical medications based on marijuana offer the same benefits. She raised the specter of problems in California and other states that have let people smoke marijuana for medicinal purposes. "I think without adequate controls, we would have mayhem," she said.

Board Chairman Vernon Benjamin, a Fort Madison pharmacist, said he doesn't believe marijuana is more likely to cause addiction than alcohol or prescription narcotics can. He also said the attraction of marijuana to young people probably is enhanced by the fact that it's illegal.

A Des Moines Register Iowa Poll released this week found that 64 percent of Iowans support allowing patients to use marijuana if their doctors approve. The Pharmacy Board previously expressed reservations about medical marijuana. But proponents sued, and a judge ruled last year that the board had to consider the matter.

The board last fall held a series of hearings around the state, at which most speakers spoke in favor of medical marijuana.

Board staff members noted a decades-old section of Iowa law giving the board authority to set up rules allowing medical uses of marijuana. But several board members said they thought the Legislature or a broad advisory panel should decide the matter.

Medical marijuana bills in the Legislature are considered dead for the year, but proponents hope the pharmacy board's vote will give the issue momentum next year.

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