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Don't rush into legalizing medical marijuana in Iowa

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On Wednesday, the Iowa Board of Pharmacy voted unanimously to recommend state lawmakers reclassify marijuana from a Schedule I drug to a Schedule II. That could lead to Iowans legally using pot for medicinal purposes. The board also suggested establishing a task force to implement a medical marijuana program.

The recommendations came on the heels of the release of a Des Moines Register Iowa Poll, which found 64 percent of Iowans favor allowing people to use marijuana as medicine. Many Iowans think it makes sense to allow those suffering from AIDS, cancer or other debilitating conditions to have access to a drug that may alleviate symptoms.

And it does make sense.

But Iowa lawmakers - and members of any task force - have a lot of work to do before allowing such use in this state.

Because decriminalizing pot for some sick Iowans extends beyond the purview of the pharmacy board. It's not just about what's popular with the public. It isn't as simple as changing the classification of a drug.

Such a change has wide-reaching consequences - for regulators, law enforcement, city planning and zoning boards, public health officials and others. Lawmakers need to fully anticipate and understand those consequences before changing the law.

And they don't need a crystal ball to do that. They need to look at the 14 other states that already allow the medicinal use of marijuana. Iowa can learn a lot from them. Did decriminalizing marijuana for medicinal purposes increase illegal use of the drug? Who sells it? Who regulates its growth and distribution? Have the lawmakers in those states needed to revisit the issue to address problems?

One good place to look is Colorado. Residents voted to legalize marijuana for medicinal use in 2000. Ten years later, the state is still grappling with regulatory issues. For example, the law doesn't state where marijuana plants may be grown. Local governments are trying to figure out how to regulate

the location of "medical marijuana dispensaries." The law requires police to keep alive marijuana plants they've confiscated until a case is resolved.

Last year, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder Jr. announced federal prosecutors would not dedicate resources to prosecuting "patients with serious illnesses or their caregivers who are complying with state laws on medical marijuana." Following that, Colorado saw a proliferation of marijuana dispensaries.

These are among the realities Iowa lawmakers need to plan for before taking action on any legislation legalizing marijuana.

In fact, members of the pharmacy board acknowledged the complexities of this issue. Prior to the vote, they publicly discussed the drug's potential value versus its potential for abuse. They recognized the types of problems that have surfaced in states that legalized the drug for medical use and the need for adequate regulatory controls.

On Wednesday, marijuana proponents cheered after the pharmacy board vote was taken. Yet they, too, acknowledged there is a lot of work left to do before the drug is actually available to patients.

And that work includes getting a comprehensive understanding of the impact of such laws in other states - and how Iowa can avoid problems in the future.

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