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Doctors: OK pot for health studies

By TONY LEYS • tleys@dmreg.com • April 20, 2010

Iowa's largest physicians' association has come out in favor of easing the state's marijuana laws so researchers could study the drug's usefulness to patients.

The Iowa Medical Society stopped short, however, of backing broad use of marijuana for ill Iowans or for people who simply want to get high.

The group's resolution comes as state leaders ponder whether Iowa should join 14 other states that allow marijuana use for medical purposes.

Delegates to the Iowa Medical Society's annual meeting last weekend approved the resolution, which supports state reclassification of marijuana. Iowa now classifies marijuana as a "Schedule I" drug, such as heroin, which rules out its use for almost any purpose. The doctors support classifying it as a "Schedule II" drug. However, they said the goal should be "facilitating further study into potential medical uses."

Dr. William Langley of Bettendorf, who led a medical society committee on the subject, said physicians discussed a broader proposal. That resolution would have supported allowing doctors to prescribe marijuana for medical purposes. Few of the delegates were ready to go that far, Langley said.

Proponents say marijuana can provide substantial relief of pain, nausea and other symptoms of illnesses such as cancer, AIDS and multiple sclerosis. Skeptics say legal drugs already are available for those conditions, and they raise concerns that legalization of medical marijuana

could make the drug more easily available for recreational use.

Langley, who runs a clinic system in the Quad Cities, said he wouldn't recommend marijuana if patients asked about it. "I would tell them, 'If you're asking me as a scientifically trained person, I would say there's not enough evidence for it.' "

But he said reclassifying marijuana could spur helpful research.

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy voted unanimously in February to recommend that the Legislature reclassify the drug. Legislative leaders have said they intend to set up a committee to consider the issue this year. If the committee comes up with a workable plan, the leaders said, legislators could debate it in January.

A Des Moines Register poll in February found that 64 percent of Iowans support allowing patients to use marijuana if their doctors approve.

Ed Hertko, a retired West Des Moines physician and proponent of medical marijuana, said he had mixed feelings about the medical society's vote.

Hertko had introduced a stronger resolution. His version said medical practitioners should not be punished for recommending marijuana for seriously ill patients, "and seriously ill patients should not be subject to criminal sanctions for using marijuana if the patients' medical practitioners have told them such use is likely to be beneficial."

Hertko said after his resolution was rejected, he voted for the more moderate version that wound up passing on a voice vote.

"They watered it down, but at least they didn't kill it," he said.

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The Iowa Medical Society, which represents about 4,600 physicians, ended up supporting a stance that is similar to one held by the Iowa Pharmacy Association since 1997. The pharmacists have said they would support experimental uses of marijuana to study its effects on patients.

The association told regulators last year that any medical uses of marijuana should be:

- Based on science.
- Overseen by medical professionals.
- Strictly regulated by the pharmacy board.

That vision is significantly different from what has happened in places such as California and Colorado, where critics say loosely regulated store-front shops sell marijuana to virtually anyone complaining of a vague ailment.

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