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Hottle: Allow Iowans to alleviate pain with medical marijuana

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Here's the scene I expected at a hearing about the legalization of medical marijuana at the University of Iowa: a room of college students with dreadlocks, who want pot legalized not for medicinal purposes but so that they can keep getting high on their dorm couches without the fear of arrest.

But at a hearing organized by the Iowa Board of Pharmacy on the subject on Wednesday, Oct. 7, at the university, the atmosphere couldn't have been more different.

Those who took the podium were people like Lisa Jackson, a middle-aged mother of four from Crawfordsville, who has searing pain constantly because of fibromyalgia, and Jimmy Morrison, the media director of a Muscatine church who suffers from bipolar disorder.

They are anything but young stoners. They are mothers, businesspeople and Iowans looking for a way to make ease their suffering.

There was one man at the hearing with the dreadlocks and a marijuana leaf T-shirt, but even he isn't what he seemed.

Anthony Harden, 33, of Tipton, has suffered from Cystic Fibrosis since birth.

Before his U of I doctor prescribed him medical marijuana in 2006, he struggled to breathe and wasn't eating enough.

"Its effects have helped me maintained a healthy weight and a good attitude," Harden said of marijuana. "For me, it's just been a gift."

But Jackson, Morrison and Harden can't legally buy marijuana here in Iowa. At least not yet.

The hearings came about after a Polk County judge on April 24 ruled the Iowa Board of Pharmacy must examine whether marijuana has been incorrectly classified as a Schedule 1 controlled substance after the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa filed a lawsuit challenging the categorization. The one in Iowa City was the third of four and after the last hearing on Nov. 4 in Council Bluffs, the board will make a classification recommendation to the Iowa Legislature.

That recommendation will not change the law, however. Legislators are the ones who have that power.

But some Iowans like Carl Olsen, co-founder of Iowans for Medical Marijuana, are hoping that a recommendation is all they need to start the legalization wheels rolling.

Said Olsen, "Marijuana has medical uses we haven't even thought of."

It is because of its medicinal uses that 13 states have decriminalized the drug and why the majority of those in attendance at the hearing stood at the podium and pleaded out for help.

"I am a good mother, a good wife and a good person," Lisa Jackson, of Crawfordsville, said from the stage of a large lecture hall to about 20 people and seven Board of Pharmacy members. "I should be allowed to continue functioning as one without the risk of going to jail to do so."

Jackson is a mother of four with a kind face. You wouldn't know she smokes weed constantly. She says she has to in order to ward off the pain that has gripped her for the last seven years.

The pain began after her hysterectomy. She was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a disorder that causes constant, widespread pain.

She is sensitive to light and even the slightest touch hurts.

The pain grew so unbearable she would occasionally overdose on her prescribed medication. So two years ago, she turned to marijuana.

"That throbbing, the burning sensations, the aches, the cramps, it's just less," Jackson said.

But there's a better reason why she uses the drug.

"I'm not in bed, I'm not on a sofa, I'm not feeling sorry for myself," she said, and added that she is honest with her family about using it.

But opponents of legalization like Jennifer Husman say those benefits aren't enough.

Husmann, a grant coordinator for Area Substance Abuse Council in Mt. Vernon and the only person to speak out against the legalization in a three-hour stretch of the hearing, said legalizing marijuana will make it too easy for kids to obtain.

"All too often, kids get their hands on cigarettes or alcohol, legal drugs for adults," Husmann testified. "We shouldn't let the same thing happen with marijuana."

Her comments were met with jeers from the crowd-and for good reason.

The bottom line is this: if pot is the one thing that can most effectively ease Jackson's pain and the nausea of chemotherapy and a host of other ills, why isn't it legal?

Not only might it be the most effective treatment, but even doctors say it is safer than some pills.

"I am able to prescribe dozens of medications with potent and dangerous side effects much more adverse than marijuana," said Deborah LeBeau, a Dubuque doctor, who supports the legalization.

State lawmakers should not only be listening to the cries for help from their fellow Iowans, but they should also do something about it.

Jackson should be allowed to live without fear she will be thrown in jail just for trying to ease her suffering. Jimmy Morrison should be allowed to treat his bipolar disorder without the risk of getting beaten and robbed in an alley again.

These aren't stoners looking for an easier way to get high. These are mothers, businesspeople and Iowans asking for help. And as their neighbors and friends, it is our duty to do what we can to make their pain a little easier to bear.

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