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Should Iowa Endorse Medical Marijuana?

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CEDAR RAPIDS - Thirteen states have laws that let people use marijuana for medical purposes. Should Iowa endorse medical marijuana?

Governor Culver says no. The American Medical Association says not without more scientific studies. The Iowa Board of Pharmacy says Iowans deserve to be a part of the debate.

The board just held its first-ever forums on medical marijuana. Opponents say marijuana is already Iowa's most abused illegal drug, and this will make the state's problem even worse. But supporters say it helps treat pain, lack of appetite, and nausea, among other things. To make their point, many admit they already smoke marijuana for medical purposes.

Without marijuana, both Lisa Jackson and Jimmy Morrison say they struggle to get out of bed. 43-year-old Jackson says she has the long-term pain syndrome, fibromyalgia.

"It's like a burning sensation in your muscles," says Jackson.

Jackson says she's mixed and matched 37 different medications, like methadone, neurontin, oxycodone, and percocet, but the side effects were always too severe. Now she takes six medications, including muscle relaxers, and she smokes marijuana several times a day.

"It allows me to get up every day and function as a mother," says Jackson.

23-year-old Morrison says he suffers from anxiety and bipolar disorder.

"When I'm really depressed, I don't want to get out of bed," says Morrison.

Morrison has never taken medication for depression, but anti-anxiety drugs make him tired and apathetic. He says smoking marijuana about three times a day helps him manage his illnesses.

"My productivity has gone up so much, people don't even know. I run a painting business, and I'm a media director at a church," says Morrison.

Morrison and Jackson were among more than 100 supporters, including medical professionals, who spoke up at recent Iowa Board of Pharmacy forums on medical marijuana.

Peggy Whitworth of Cedar Rapids is one of seven members on the state board.

"It certainly has been an interesting process. One in which people have very strong feelings," says Whitworth.

Whitworth says those who claim marijuana helps treat medical conditions like glaucoma, cancer,

epilepsy, and multiple sclerosis, have been more outspoken.

"I quite frankly have been surprised at the very, very few people who have spoken in opposition to it," says Whitworth.

Lorna Richards of Area Substance Abuse Council is against legalizing medical marijuana, saying it would send a message the drug is safe, when it's not.

"It could affect the brain, different parts of the brain, and inhibit the functionality of the brain. It affects the lungs very similar to tobacco, so similar to those types of respiratory illnesses," says Richards.

She also argues people can become dependent on the drug. The state department of public health says marijuana is the most abused illegal drug among Iowa youth and adults. Richards adds marijuana can lead to more serious drug problems.

"It's definitely seen as a gateway drug. It leads to the use and abuse of other types of drugs," says Richards.

The director of the University of Iowa's Drug Information Network warns against legalizing medical marijuana without more research.

"We don't know enough right now. We need to continue to do research and find out," says Dr. Ron Herman.

Herman says the marijuana plant contains hundreds of chemicals, and when smoked, some of the chemicals have beneficial effects, but others can have serious health and psychological effects.

"If we can refine and identify the appropriate chemical substances in there that would give us the desired effect, I think there is good potential," says Herman.

But Herman points out researchers in Iowa hesitate to seek funding for and dedicate time to researching an illegal drug that might never be used for medical purposes.

"I'm hoping once the state realizes it is a medicine, they will start looking at more research," says Morrison.

"I shouldn't have to suffer with the pain. I shouldn't have to go back to bed. And I shouldn't have to go to jail," says Jackson.

Jackson and Morrison say they're not speaking out to get sympathy. They just don't want to be considered criminals for using marijuana for medical purposes.

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy can't change the law. It can only make a recommendation on medical marijuana to state lawmakers. The board will do that sometime before the next legislative session, which starts in January.

Senator Joe Bolkcom of Iowa City introduced a medical marijuana bill this past legislative session, but it never made it out of subcommittee.

