

## Critics, supporters have their say about medical marijuana

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MASON CITY — Robin Mahnesmith said he is not lying — there are medical benefits of marijuana use.

Mahnesmith, 48, of Mason City, was one of several Iowans who pleaded their case for the legalization of marijuana for medicinal purposes Wednesday at a public hearing of the Iowa Pharmacy Board in Mason City.

“I’m not a liar,” Mahnesmith told the Pharmacy Board. “It’s a fact. My symptoms are so much less and my mind is so much easier (when taking marijuana). I don’t just have to sit and think about this rotten disease I have.”

Diagnosed with MS in 1988, Mahnesmith lost the use of his legs in 2005 and is in a wheelchair. “We don’t want to be criminals for doing something that helps us physically and psychologically. I tell people, what would you do?”

The Pharmacy Board is seeking information about medical marijuana in a series of hearings being held around the state. Their review of the information gathered could result in a recommendation to the Iowa Legislature.

Vietnam veteran Bob Watson of Decorah told the board he finds it “morally reprehensible” that doctors may not write prescriptions for marijuana when they know it’s the best medicine available to some patients for their symptoms.

Watson, who suffers from post traumatic stress disorder, seizures and anxiety attacks, talked about the presence of THC, a substance in cannabis — the scientific name for marijuana — that he said has been proven to have a beneficial impact on the brain.

Ray Lakers of Des Moines, 42, an MS patient who was jailed for possession of less than a gram of marijuana in 2005, became emotional talking about how smoking marijuana had helped him.

“It gave my body strength,” he said. “I felt a lot more mobilized and I could move better. It made me not depressed.”

“We need to be forward-thinking,” he said.

Among others who spoke on behalf of legalization of medical marijuana were:

- Barbara Douglass of Des Moines. Too ill to attend in person, she provided a statement that was read to the board.

Diagnosed with MS in 1988, Douglass said she could walk and travel while provided with marijuana while participating in a federal government-sponsored program for 16 years. She experienced no side effects from marijuana use, Douglass said.

A few years ago, she was pulled from the program. Her condition worsened significantly.

“Iowa has the power to pass a compassionate-use exemption,” Douglass said.

- A statement read on behalf of Vietnam veteran Ludd Huffman of Calumet told about how Huffman, 58, was diagnosed with MS at the age of 27.

“I’ve tried several prescription medications but stopped because of the side effects, including weakness, which I had enough of,” said Huffman.

He was raising his own marijuana plants to use for symptom relief until a neighbor reported him, he said.

“My quality of life quickly deteriorated and I became completely homebound.”

- Jeff, who did not give his last name, of Des Moines, suffers from chronic nausea and vomiting related to his

diabetes, sciatic nerve pain and osteoarthritis.

“To withhold it is cruel and inhumane,” he said. “This is not just about the patients. It’s about freeing up the doctors, too”

Jeff said he would leave the state for the sake of his health if the Legislature does not approve marijuana for medicinal purposes.

- Jason, 20, of Ankeny, a college student, said all drugs have negative consequences.

“If the benefits outweigh the negatives, as is the case with cannabis, then the drug in question is usually approved. This year, I hope the board will help to decriminalize truth-telling and allow patients the medicine they need.”

Maedene Sappenfield of Mason City, on the other hand, spoke out against medical marijuana.

“I have a son-in-law in North Carolina who has MS and he functions without marijuana very well, so it is possible,” she said. “My opinion is that legalizing marijuana is opening a door.”