

Consensus: Medical marijuana helps pain, needs more research

By *JAMES Q. LYNCH, Globe Des Moines Bureau*

IOWA CITY — A state board was asked Wednesday to “sow the seeds of medicine and health” by allowing the medicinal use of marijuana.

For him, “Marijuana has been a gift,” Anthony Harden of Tipton said at the Iowa Board of Pharmacy hearing at the University of Iowa. “It’s kept me here. It’s given me new life ... and helped me be a productive member of society.”

Although that sentiment was not unanimous, the consensus of speakers — medical professionals and people who suffer chronic conditions — at the board’s third public hearing on medical marijuana was there are some benefits for its use, especially for pain relief, but more research is needed.

That research won’t happen without marijuana being legalized for medical use, they said.

“I don’t want to spend a lot of time researching something that doesn’t have the potential to be used,” John Stamler, an ophthalmologist and UI Ophthalmology and Visual Science researcher, said. Marijuana has “a lot of potential” for medicinal use.

Larry Quigley of Cedar Falls, who suffers pain as a result of a spinal cord injury and has used a wheelchair for 28 years, has done his own research.

“What I do know is that it does work for me. If you give me marijuana and I take it, I can show you the difference,” Quigley said. However, he’s unwilling to use it illegally, “So I’m going to suffer.”

Robert Manke of Des Moines is unwilling to suffer. While visiting his mother in Oregon he received medical marijuana that relieved pain caused by injuries suffered in traffic collisions without the side effects of prescription drugs, including vomiting.

“I’m not here to ask you to help me get high,” he said. “I’m just trying to stop puking.”

The testimony during the seven-hour hearing was “compelling,” according to Peggy Whitworth, a board member from Cedar Rapids. “There was some really amazing personal experiences.”

Some speakers may not understand the process, she said, in that the board can only make a recommendation. The ultimate decision to legalize medical marijuana will be up to the Iowa Legislature.

“I don’t know this is an issue for either party, so it’s going to take multiple champions if it’s going to happen,” Whitworth said.

Jennifer Huisman of ASAC in Cedar Rapids, a substance-abuse treatment center, doesn’t want it to happen at all. She warned against legalizing even the medicinal use of marijuana and was interrupted by catcalls from audience members. Any lessening of the prohibitions against marijuana use would pose a threat to children, she said.

That argument suggests the very specific issue being considered by the pharmacy board is being confused with broader changes in state law, said Robert Kirby, an adjunct professor at UI teaching a class on the legalization of drugs.

While the pharmacy board is considering neither decriminalization nor legalization of marijuana, Kirby said some groups are arguing the issue more broadly.

“Some groups, those who would like to see marijuana legalized, may see this as a stepping stone to what’s next,” he said. “Others, who oppose any loosening of the laws, see it as the proverbial slippery slope.”

For Lisa Jackson of Crawfordsville, what's next would be legally obtaining relief from pain associated with her fibromyalgia. She doesn't regret smoking marijuana to relieve the, but she resents not being able to obtain it legally.

"I don't do anything wrong. Marijuana is my only option," she said, adding that the medications she takes on a daily basis "are more deadly to me than marijuana."

Medicinal use of marijuana "deserves a rational debate," Deborah LeBeau, OB/GYN, told the board. Research has been stifled by propaganda that makes medical professional reluctant to jump into the debate, she said.

Medicinal marijuana is "relatively safe compared to many drugs used to treat pain," LeBeau said.

"Don't look at the stigma. Look at the science," added Dustin Krutsinger, a registered nurse and second-year medical student at UI.

Reach James Lynch at 319-398-8375 or at james.lynch@gazcomm.com.