



Council Bluffs

Should pot be legal?

Advocates, opponents of medical marijuana address the Iowa Board of Pharmacy

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Jacqueline Patterson took a deep breath and stared straight out at the crowd.

With stops, starts and pauses, she struggled to free the sounds that were hindered by a lifelong stutter.

"I have been on many prescription medications," said Patterson, a 31-year-old from California. "Those did not assist me in controlling my stutter nearly as effectively as cannabis."

The former Iowa resident has used marijuana off and on since she was 14 to treat her stutter and cerebral palsy symptoms.

When she uses marijuana, she said, the severity of her stutter decreases by about 90 percent. But, she said, doing so makes her a criminal in most states, including Iowa and Nebraska, and in the eyes of the federal government. Medical marijuana is legal in California.

The Iowa Board of Pharmacy held its fourth and final public hearing on medical marijuana Wednesday in Council Bluffs.

Statements ranged from personal to professional on the topic, which Terry Witkowski, executive officer of the board, called a "sensitive medical, social and political issue."

The board could make a recommendation to the Legislature based on the four hearings and a scientific review.

The Council Bluffs forum came amid national debate on the issue.

In Tuesday's elections, Maine became the fifth state to allow regulated marijuana dispensaries to grow the drug and sell it to patients. The Obama administration said in recent weeks that it would not target patients or marijuana dispensaries if they were following state law.

The Board of Pharmacy has been ordered by a Polk County judge to consider a petition to take marijuana off Iowa's Schedule I drug list. Schedule I drugs are ones that are thought to have a high risk of abuse and that do not have a safe medical purpose.

If the drug is reclassified, it could boost a bill sponsored by State Sen. Joe Bolkom, D-Iowa City, that would legalize the drug for medical purposes. The bill stalled this year, but Bolkom hopes it will receive more support in the 2010 session.

Speakers addressed board members Ed Maier of Mapleton and Susan Frey of Villisca as well as Witkowski.

The board heard from representatives of two Omaha-based groups who argued strongly against the legalization of marijuana for any reason.

Paul Carter, executive director of PRIDE-Omaha, a group that fights drug and alcohol use by young people, urged the board to look beyond emotional tales like Patterson's.

"Marijuana is dangerous," Carter said. "It's an addictive drug, and it has no medical value."

He asked the board to think about the message that marijuana as medicine would send to children.

"Is the message that marijuana is OK, because someone can smoke it and feel better?" he asked.

Jeff Elton of Des Moines suffers from diabetes-induced gastroparesis or "paralyzed stomach," a disorder that affects the stomach's ability to empty its contents.

As a result, Elton has chronic nausea and vomiting, which he has not been able to manage with approved medications.

Inhaling marijuana vapors helps his nausea subside, Elton said. "Please do the compassionate and the right thing."

Susie Dugan said the board's decision should be based on more than "anecdotal accounts of benefits."

Dugan is former executive director of PRIDE-Omaha and a representative of the affiliated Drug Watch International.

If the compounds found in marijuana have medicinal benefits, she said, they should be isolated and developed into drugs.

"We don't chew the foxglove plant to get digitalis, a drug used to treat heart disease. We don't drink the urine of pregnant horses to get estrogen replacement. We don't eat moldy bread to get penicillin," said Dugan.

"Sick people should not smoke a crude weed and call it medical marijuana."

The board said it will base its decision on several criteria, including marijuana's potential for abuse, its pharmacological effects, current scientific knowledge and the risk, if any, that reclassifying the drug would pose to public health.

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