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Local woman takes medicinal marijuana battle to Pharmacy Board

By: Dana Larsen, Pilot Tribune Editor

September 03, 2009

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Barbara Douglass, Lakeside, continues to lend her voice to the battle for medicinal marijuana, and after 40 years of debates, she feels a corner is finally being turned toward awareness.

Douglass has been asked to write testimony to be read at a key hearing of the Iowa Board of Pharmacy this week as the board examines the medicinal value of marijuana. The board's conclusion is seen as a vital step toward legalization. The local woman is too ill with multiple sclerosis to attend the hearing in Mason City. Her statement to the board is being read for her by Jim Morrison, of the Marijuana Policy Project.

Douglass, one of only four patients in the United States still receiving legal medicinal marijuana from a brief U.S. government program that was shut down in 1992, continues to be a tireless advocate for legalization of medicinal marijuana as a pain treatment for illnesses such as MS, AIDS, cancer, Crohn's Disease, fibromyalgia, glaucoma, alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS), hepatitis C and gastroparesis.

"Marijuana is a medicine, and it obviously works. It's as simple as that," Douglass says. "We have said the same thing for 40 years, it's just that finally, finally, finally the right ears are starting to hear it."

A bill known as "The Medicinal Marijuana Act" was introduced in an Iowa Senate committee in March. If approved, it would allow the doctor-prescribed use of marijuana for several forms of debilitating illness in Iowa. Patients would be issued identification cards, and the drug would have to be kept in a locked, secure location. The bill would also protect users of medicinal marijuana from being discriminated against by schools, employers or landlords.

"They have to realize that people are using marijuana to manage their pain.

Some people take pills, and some find that marijuana works better for them," Douglass said. Without legislative action, these people face the possibility of criminal prosecution, as Iowa is one of 37 states where users of medicinal marijuana face arrest for possession of illegal substances. At the first Pharmacy Board hearing in August,

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both doctors and patients spoke out for medicinal marijuana, as well as two people in opposition. Those opposing a change in the law are questioning how the drug can be regulated.

Douglass said her phone "rings of the hook every day," with people encouraging her to speak out.

As much as her declining health allows, she tries to do so, for the sake of others who are going through, or will go through, the same suffering she has experienced.

Also speaking at the hearing is Ray Lakers, Des Moines, an MS patient who found relief from medical marijuana and was jailed for possession of less than a gram in 2005. Some of the other available drugs cause side effects "that are worse than the disease," he says.

Douglass' longtime friend, Ladd Huffman of Calument, will also have a statement read at the hearing, as he is also too ill from MS to attend. The Vietnam veteran was approved for the federal medicinal marijuana program in the 1990s, just as it shut down, and so is barred from receiving the medication as Douglass does.

Douglass says the debate seems to ebb and flow, but she is enthused that Iowa leaders are at least considering a reversal of a stance against medicinal marijuana. She has hopes of seeing the issue through, although her own illness has slowly robbed her of mobility and much of her lifestyle.

"My life consists of jumping from the scooter to the couch. When I make it, I say to myself, 'Excellent dismount! Way to stick the landing!,'" she says. "I will always fight it."

Editor's note: Iowans can share their opinions on medicinal marijuana with the Pharmacy Board by e-mailing to Debbie.Jorgenson@ibpe.state.ia.us.

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