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Detroit's Rochelle Lampkin asks: "Why keep medical marijuana illegal if it helps people?" (Photo by: Bruce Giffin)

Prescription pot

Drive under way to make medical marijuana legal in Michigan

by **Curt Guyette**
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Rochelle Lampkin knows she's breaking the law when she lights a joint and takes a few tokes, but she doesn't feel like a criminal.

"Sometimes," she says, "you have to do something that's wrong for all the right reasons."

The 48-year-old Detroit grandmother has multiple sclerosis, and an associated condition called optic neuritis, an excruciatingly painful inflammation of the optic nerve. It hits her a few times a month.

"It's like an explosion," says Lampkin. "On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd say it's a 12."

She tried prescription pain relievers, but was bothered by the side effects. Vicodin, a narcotic related to opium, made her nauseous and sleepy. Tylenol 4, which contains the opiate codeine, had a similar effect. "They were just too strong for me," says Lampkin.

Then some people in the MS support groups she belongs to started suggesting she try pot to ease the pain. One of the frequently cited medical benefits attributed to marijuana is its effectiveness at easing the spasms that often afflict people who suffer from MS. Although spasms weren't a major problem for Lampkin, some thought it could help deal with the eye pain as well. But Lampkin was reluctant. Neither a drinker nor a smoker, she recoiled at the thought of doing an illegal drug.

"I was afraid of it," recalls Lampkin. But finally, out of desperation, she got a "marijuana cigarette" from a friend she knew would be "discreet and wouldn't lace it with anything" and fired up. It took just a few "puffs" for the pain to ease.

"It worked," she says.

Now she's backing a push to make it legal for Michigan doctors to prescribe marijuana to patients like herself.

The drive to place the Michigan Medical Marijuana Act on the 2008 ballot began last month. Dianne Byrum, a former state legislator whose PR firm is working with the Ferndale-based Michigan Coalition for Compassionate Care, says organizers have six months to collect 304,101 valid petition signatures to get the measure on the ballot; the goal is to collect 550,000 signatures to ensure enough are valid. Both volunteers and paid signature-gatherers will be used, says Byrum.

If approved by voters, the measure would allow patients with a doctor's prescription or their caregivers to grow up to 12 plants. They would need to register with the state Department of Community Health and receive a state-issued ID card.

Twelve states have legalized the use of marijuana to ease the suffering of people afflicted with AIDS, cancer, multiple sclerosis, glaucoma and other serious ailments. Only once, in South Dakota, have voters turned down a statewide medical marijuana measure once it got on the ballot.

Even in the eyes of proponents, these measures are not without their flaws. With the exception of California's, the laws don't allow for the establishment of distribution systems. Ideally, patients would be able to go to a pharmacy to get prescriptions filled, just as they would any other medicine. But because federal law prohibits that, anyone supplying marijuana to a patient, no matter what the state law is, is open to prosecution by federal authorities. Likewise, federal agents can still arrest patients using marijuana as medicine, even if state law allows it.

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For critics, the fact that these laws are on the books at all is the real problem.

In 2005, when the U.S. Supreme Court decided that state laws did not protect medical marijuana users from federal prosecution, John P. Walters, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, hailed the ruling, saying: "There isn't medical crack, there isn't medical meth, there isn't medical heroin, there isn't medical marijuana."

"I'm sorry, that's just crazy, but that's the level of absurdity this discussion reaches," says Bruce Mirken, communications director for the Marijuana Policy Project, a nonprofit advocacy group.

For starters, a number of established medical groups have endorsed the use of medicinal marijuana. Organizations including the American Academy of Family Physicians, American Nurses Association, American Public Health Association and the American Academy of HIV Medicine have come out in support of some form of physician-assisted access to pot.

Former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders wrote in a newspaper opinion piece that the "evidence is overwhelming that marijuana can relieve certain types of pain, nausea, vomiting and other symptoms caused by such illnesses as multiple sclerosis, cancer and AIDS — or by the harsh drugs sometimes used to treat them. And it can do so with remarkable safety. Indeed, marijuana is less toxic than many of the drugs used today."

But acceptance by the medical establishment is far from universal. Neither the American Medical Association nor the Michigan State Medical Society endorses the use of medical marijuana; they and others contend more research is needed.

Some of the past objections are falling by the wayside, however. The criticism that it makes no sense to deliver a medicine that contains all the harmful effects of smoke is neutered by the development of vaporizers that allow marijuana to be inhaled in a smokeless form.

But, paradoxically, such "paraphernalia" is generally illegal, driving up their cost and making them inaccessible to people like Lampkin, who would like to be able to use such a device.

"The smoke is like taking nasty medicine, when I was a kid," says Lampkin. "It's not fun, but I do it because it works."

She's not claiming it's a prescription for everyone's ills. What she is saying that there are people for whom it is effective, and preferable to the other options. There might be people who will abuse it — but that's not a reason to prohibit its use. After all, look at the number of people abusing Vicodin and other prescription drugs.

In Michigan, proponents of medical marijuana have reason to be optimistic. Since 2004, voters in five cities — Detroit, Ann Arbor, Traverse City, Ferndale and Flint — have passed ordinances that direct local police to let medical marijuana users puff in peace. In each case, voters approved the measures by large margins.

Rochelle Lampkin, who spoke out in favor of the Detroit measure, is doing so again in support of the statewide initiative. But she's urging voters to research the issue and decide for themselves what's right. In researching this article, the *Metro Times* found a good site for exploring both sides of the issue on the Web at medicalmarijuanaprocon.org.

For the people like Lampkin who've found pot to be an effective medicine that relieves their suffering, this comes down to a personal decision.

"I know what I'm doing is against the law," she says. "But I've come to terms with that. I hope it's made legal."

Either way though, she has what she considers a legitimate reason for continuing to use it.

"I'm a grown woman," she says. "Why would you tell me I can't do something that helps me? That's sick."

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