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Opening the Door to a New Medical Marijuana Policy

April 9, 2009 | | [Leave a Comment](#)

While marijuana continues to be illegal under federal law, thirteen states, including first California in 1996 and most recently Michigan in 2008, have adopted laws legalizing the medical use of marijuana. This conflict between federal and state policies was brought into sharp focus during the Bush administration, which authorized the Drug Enforcement Agency to raid medical marijuana dispensaries and distributors across the country. Taking a sharp turn from Bush's anti-medical-marijuana policies, the Obama administration has now promised to put an end to the DEA's raids and adopt a hands-off approach that will allow states to pass and enforce laws on medical marijuana as they deem fit. (See the NY Times article [here](#).) Many speculate that this is a significant step towards a new and improved federal policy on medical marijuana.

Of course, with the economic crisis pressing, no one can expect legalizing marijuana to turn into a priority issue any time soon. Or could we? One of the less obvious benefits of legalizing medical marijuana is the potential for a dramatic increase in state revenue directly attributable to fees and taxes associated with production and possession. To give you an idea of the numbers we are talking about, consider a recent [Wall Street Journal](#) article, which reported that as a \$14 billion crop in California, medical marijuana could generate over \$1 billion annually when taxed at \$50 an ounce. Not enough to bail out the U.S. auto market for sure, but a considerable sum nonetheless.

"This is a scan of a photograph of a legally grown marijuana crop in rural Crittenden County, Kentucky, that was taken in 1942.

Doctors and politicians alike have long haggled over the medical benefits and risks of marijuana. As some of the scientific evidence continues to appear conflicting, depending on which (political party) expert you talk to, you may hear that marijuana boosts or suppresses the immune system of



HIV/AIDS patients, relieves or increases nausea, damages or protects lung tissue when inhaled, leads or does not lead to addiction, does or does not produce a "gateway" effect into subsequent use of "harder" drugs, such as cocaine or heroin. Despite the continued uncertainty, peer-reviewed medical studies on marijuana, involving both human and animal subjects, seem to tip the balance in a pro-marijuana direction, showing a multitude of legitimate and safe medical uses. In the states where medical marijuana has actually been legalized, the list of approved indications is long and impressive: cancer, HIV/AIDS, agitation of Alzheimer's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease), anorexia, arthritis, cachexia, cancer, Crohn's disease, epilepsy and other seizure disorders, glaucoma, hepatitis C, migraines, multiple sclerosis and other muscle spasticity disorders, nail patella, nausea, severe and chronic pain.

Aside from the purely medical pros and cons, legalizing marijuana implicates

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a number of contentious social, cultural and economic consequences. One of the main concerns with the concept of legal medical marijuana involves the message it would send to young and inexperienced recreational users. In contrast with the vastly popular TV ads questioning young users "How much of yourself do you leave behind?" a law authorizing the use of marijuana would legitimize the perception that marijuana is not only not dangerous, but is in fact beneficial. In addition, legal uses would increase the amount of marijuana available overall and thus widen access for illegal users as well. All in all, teen smoking rates would go sky high. Or so the argument goes. A somewhat surprising [statistic](#) shows that eight out of the ten states that had legalized medical marijuana by 2006 saw a decrease in teen use of marijuana from 1999 to 2006. Although this number does not in any way imply that concerns over legalizing medical marijuana are ill-founded, it does illustrate that we need to be ever so critical in evaluating the stereotypical arguments that ruled the debate under the Bush administration. For those who worry (or rejoice) that legalizing medical marijuana may ultimately lead to legalizing recreational uses of marijuana, worry (rejoice) not! There is no doubt that we are light-years away from San Francisco becoming the new Amsterdam.

For a comprehensive account of medical marijuana pros, cons, scientific studies, government policies and almost 5,000 year history of use, click [here](#).

Photo courtesy of Flickr user [TheNiteTripper](#).

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