

Politicians, doctors conflicted over medical marijuana

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ELGIN — Michigan recently became the 14th state to legalize medical marijuana. Illinois may not be far behind.

Senate Bill 1381 would allow seriously ill patients with certain debilitating conditions to use medical marijuana without consequence of arrest, and would provide for the patient's primary caregiver to legally possess no more than seven dried cannabis plants and two ounces of dried usable cannabis.

A House version of the bill passed March 4. Bruce Mirken, director of communications for the Marijuana Policy Project, said he expects the Senate vote to take place within the next three weeks.

Sen. Chris Lauzen, R-Aurora, is against the legislation, but still conflicted about it.

"The older I get, the more people I know who are suffering from cancer," he said. "You just think, anything they can get to relieve the pain. If pain never touches you, it is easy to say this is right or wrong. On the other hand, wait until it happens to you, or wait 'til it happens to someone you love."

Lauzen noted there is a pharmaceutical substitute that offers the same benefit — Marinol. He said he also opposes the bill because there is not a clear way to regulate the amount needed for pain relief. Marinol is a pill containing the active ingredient THC.

According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the pill has been found to relieve nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy for cancer. The USDA says the drug is a safer alternative since it does not contain the chemicals or carcinogens found in smoked marijuana. The USDA also reported that some states that have legalized medical marijuana, such as California, have seen an abuse of the system.

States that have legalized marijuana for medical purposes are Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.

Dr. Thomas Cao, a board-certified medical oncologist at Sherman Health in Elgin and a self-described "classic conservative," said he is in favor of legalizing medical marijuana in order to improve quality of life for patients.

Cao said it is especially helpful for patients who have cachexia, a wasting syndrome that causes weakness and loss of muscle and fat tissue, which causes patients to lose their appetites, and those with eating disorders such as anorexia.

"Pain is a difficult thing to assess, and for some patients, marijuana works best ... When they feel good, they eat more," he said.

Although some find it helpful, Cao said most patients find that marijuana does not work for their conditions.

Cao said the drug has negative political connotations that it is important for patient quality of life.

"Morphine used to be banned, but now we have medical use and we recognize the medical benefits of the drug. There are more people using it now," he said.

State Rep. Kay Hatcher, the new representative in the 50th District, said the bill in the Illinois House is very loosely written.

"This issue is complex, and it's so very easy to see both sides of the argument, but to me, the bottom line is the message we would send to our

youngsters that it's no big deal to use marijuana," she said. "It is a big deal, and that's the reason for my no vote."

Chilakamarri Yeshwant, a medical oncologist and hematologist at Sherman Health, is also against the legalization of medical marijuana, even for patients suffering from chronic pain.

Yeshwant said the problem with providing access to medical marijuana is that there is not a standardized amount given, and that all the side effects of smoking cigarettes, such as lung and throat damage, also appear in patients smoking marijuana.

"Marijuana is not a safe drug to just take," he said. "I think emotions should be set aside and people should take advice from physicians. They know that we have scientific data which shows that it is not a healthy drug."

Visit www.medicalmarijuana.procon.org for more information on the topic.

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mos619 wrote:

I love how they cite the abuses of the system in California while completely ignoring the already rampant abuses of the current prescription drug system. I know of at least one doctor for certain in my town who will prescribe any opiate based narcotic for what if you're willing to pay the price. Do we then start systematically banning oxycotin, vicodin, morphine, xanax, valium, codeine and the rest? All of which, by the way, are more harmful to an individual's health than cannabis. You can easily die from accidentally taking too many aspirins, it is impossible to overdose on cannabis. Yes marinol exists, but why would someone pay the outrageous prices for a prescription medication when they could easily grow a plant that's the same thing, plus 59 other therapeutic compounds, in their back yards or even in their homes? Smoking it is bad? Guess what! You don't have to smoke it! You can concentrate it into an oil, or make a butter from it and receive all the benefits and satisfy your hunger at the same time. And Hatcher...that's just rich. I suppose she thinks because doctors can in certain cases implement cocaine as a general anesthetic that that means we're saying cocaine isn't a big deal. Or that they should be popping vicodin like gum drops. I'm an adult, and a parent, and I think I can handle a world in which marijuana can be prescribed to sick people by highly qualified health care professionals. I think I can explain to my son that these people are very sick and this is a medicine that does a lot to help them....in fact I'm going to write Mrs. Hatcher and tell her just that; that I've taken the liberty of educating my six year old son on the medicinal value of cannabis and that it is like any drug to be used strictly in the treatment of ailments and he says he understands perfectly well and says it is ok to vote yes, you don't have to protect me. Can't wait to see the response I get from that, though I have no illusions, I won't get one. Springfield is deaf.

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musclecar freak wrote:

I am so sick of the "the message we would send to our youngsters" argument! WHAT A COP OUT! You are responsible as parents and adults to educate our youngsters about the medical value of cannabis and the undesirable side effects that some experience from its use without using fear tactics and lies. Don't you do this in regards to DEATH-DEALING PHARMACEUTICALS in medicine cabinets across our nation? Cannabis medicine is well documented and those that are denying its efficacy are simply ignorant of current scientific studies. Is cannabis totally benign? No, but neither is aspirin. If you take 15 of those little white pills my friend you will never have a headache again! You will never get that kind of result while using cannabis. I say this; if you can't as parents and adults properly inform our youngsters of why cannabis is used as medicine and at the same time not appropriate for them (like millions have done successfully with their youngsters) you are in no way qualified to make a decision about its use for medical purposes. For that matter you are not qualified to have alcohol or tobacco in your homes for fear of your inability to explain why those DEATH-DEALING substances are not for our youngsters. One thing is for sure, if you as parents and adults are incapable of your duty regarding the education and monitoring of our youngsters then what gives you the right to make a decision on what kind of medicine I use? That's correct, YOU HAVE NO RIGHT! So stop with the "the message we would send to our youngsters" argument. It only

