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April 18, 2008, 10:04 am

Presidential Candidates on Marijuana

By JOHN TIERNEY

TAGS: MARIJUANA, PAIN

For patients and doctors who want to use medical marijuana for pain relief, there's more good news from researchers — and maybe signs of change in Washington.

Barth Wilsey and colleagues at the University of California at Davis [report in the Journal of Pain](#) that medical marijuana proved effective in treating patients suffering from nerve damage related due to diabetes, spinal injury, multiple sclerosis and other causes. The study, which included a control group of patients who were given placebo cigarettes, found that the patients given real marijuana cigarettes experienced significant pain relief.

As [noted here at the Lab](#), a [study published last year in Neurology](#) by University of San Francisco researchers reported that marijuana was comparable to morphine in providing relief for patients suffering intense neuropathic foot pain associated with H.I.V. infections.

This research may not make much difference in the last year of the Bush administration, which has justified its crackdown on medical marijuana by saying there's no evidence of its efficacy, but could policies change next year?

Bruce Mirken, who has been tracking the issue for the [Marijuana Policy Project](#), says John McCain has been dismissive of marijuana's medical potential and has been unclear on whether he'd continue federal raids against clinics in states that have legalized medical marijuana. Of the two leading Democratic candidates, Mr. Mirken says, Barack Obama has been clearer in his support for medical marijuana. Here are excerpts of what [Mr. Obama told the Mail Tribune](#) newspaper in Oregon, one of the states that has legalized medical marijuana:

When it comes to medical marijuana, I have more of a practical view than anything else. My attitude is that if it's an issue of doctors prescribing medical marijuana as a treatment for glaucoma or as a cancer treatment, I think that should be appropriate because there really is no difference between that and a doctor prescribing morphine or anything else. . . .

I'm not familiar with all the details of the initiative that was passed [in Oregon] and what safeguards there were in place, but I think the basic concept that using medical marijuana in the same way, with the same controls as other drugs prescribed by doctors, I think that's entirely appropriate.

I would not punish doctors if it's prescribed in a way that is appropriate. That may require some changes in federal law. I will tell you that . . . the likelihood of that being real high on my list is not likely. What I'm not going to be doing is using Justice Department resources to try to circumvent state laws on this issue simply because I want folks to be investigating violent crimes and potential terrorism. We've got a lot of things for our law enforcement officers to deal with."

Here's what Hillary Clinton said in [a question-and-answer session with the Willamette Week newspaper](#) in Oregon:

What would you do as president about the federal government not recognizing Oregon's Medical Marijuana Program as legal?

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About TierneyLab

John Tierney always wanted to be a scientist but went into journalism because its peer-review process was a great deal easier to sneak through. Now a columnist for the Science Times section, Tierney previously wrote columns for the Op-Ed page, the Metro section and the Times Magazine. Before that he covered science for magazines like Discover, Hippocrates and Science 86.

With your help, he's using TierneyLab to check out new research and rethink conventional wisdom about science and society. The Lab's work is guided by two founding principles:

- 1. Just because an idea appeals to a lot of people doesn't mean it's wrong.
- 2. But that's a good working theory.

Comments and suggestions are welcome, particularly from researchers with new findings. E-mail tierneylab@nytimes.com.

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Comments of the Moment

“Greenpeace and similar organizations seem not to care about starving poor people in the developing world because of their single-minded agenda to preserve the part of the world that does not include human beings. What we need is a balanced approach motivated by human compassion. Hopefully we can also save some whales while we are at it.”

— Wheat Williams
Greens and Hunger

“If one believes that global warming is a question of the survival of planet earth, as I do, this is a painful dilemma; should we put more

