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Patients continue push to legalize medical marijuana in Illinois

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A few minutes of smoking marijuana give Ana DeVarose hours of relief from the pain and nausea associated with multiple sclerosis so the 22-year-old Springfield woman doesn't have to take a handful of prescription medicines every day.

But because using marijuana, even for medicinal purposes, is illegal in Illinois, the availability of cannabis on the black market can be spotty, its quality and contents often are unknown, and users risk arrest.

"I don't want to be considered a criminal for something that is healthy for me," DeVarose said. "I want to be out of pain. I just want myself and other patients to have safe access to this. It has so many beneficial medical effects for the body."

DeVarose is among Illinoisans with chronic health conditions who have spent time lobbying state lawmakers, urging them to let Illinois join 14 other states, including California and New Jersey, that have made "medical marijuana" legal.

The Illinois House adjourned Friday before acting on legislation legalizing medical marijuana that has passed the Senate. But advocates say they will continue to push for Senate Bill 1381, which they say contains safeguards to prevent abuse of medical marijuana and criminal involvement in growing and distributing the drug.

"We believe you're putting it in the hands of people interested in being responsible citizens," said Brian Mueller, director of Chicago-based Illinois Safe Access.

But opponents worry that the measure would lead to more illicit marijuana use and say scientific evidence on the benefits of medical marijuana is far from conclusive.

'Not good for you'

"There's a lot of stuff in marijuana that's not good for you," said Limey Nargelenas, a lobbyist for the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police.

It's also unclear whether the relief patients claim to receive from marijuana is good for them in the long term, he said.

"It's like people taking meth," he said. "People feel a lot better after ingesting methamphetamine."

Supporters of the bill say studies published in peer-reviewed journals show that cannabis provides "medicinal relief" to patients with cancer, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy and Crone's disease.

But Dr. Eric Larson, a general internist at Seattle's Group Health Research Institute and co-author of a 1999 Institute of Medicine report on medical marijuana, said the studies are "pretty limited, and they don't have adequate follow-up. Most of the science is pretty primitive."

Smoking marijuana can damage the lungs, he said, and it would be safer if all of the beneficial chemical compounds in marijuana could be adequately studied and refined into federally approved medicines that could be "delivered safely and not so subject to abuse."

Larson said it's clear that medical marijuana has benefits, such as easing nausea in certain cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. But research on medical marijuana has been hindered by the federal classification of marijuana as a "completely illegal drug," he said.

States' efforts to legalize medical marijuana are "not a good way to make public policy," he said. "I wish the federal government would re-examine its policies."

Advocates say legalization of medical marijuana would pave the way for more research.

Possible vote after election

State Rep. Lou Lang, D-Skokie, said last week that it appeared the Illinois bill was a few votes short of the 60 required for passage in the House. He said he won't call it for a vote unless he knows ahead of time that the measure will pass.

He said he may call for a vote after the November election and before newly elected lawmakers take office in January.

Many opponents point to problems in California, where a referendum in 1996 made medical marijuana legal. Lang and other advocates said the Illinois legislation would have much stricter provisions on how medical marijuana would be grown and sold and how patients would qualify for "cards" authorizing them to buy it.

"California screwed this up," Lang said.

"What I have to overcome is the basic political calculation that many of my colleagues take," he said. "Ultimately, this

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is a health-care bill. It's not a bill about drugs. I'm here for people's health care and pain. We should do this controlled piece of legislation ... to help people."

DeVarose, a former server in a restaurant who is single and unemployed, first experienced MS symptoms in 2008. She discovered in January 2009 that marijuana relieved her extreme nausea, as well as muscle spasms and shooting pains in her face and arms.

"It would instantly calm my stomach," she said. "This was the only thing keeping the food down."

She said marijuana also helps to alleviate the muscle aches, chills and fever that are side effects of injectable prescription drugs she takes to slow the progression of MS.

Not high, just normal

DeVarose, who is uninsured and receives marijuana from friends who foot the bill for it, said she no longer has to take a variety of prescription pain medicines, one of which caused life-threatening side effects.

"I'm not getting a euphoric high," she said. "I'm just feeling more normal."

Dennis Garland, 61, of Chatham, a former parts manager at a local car dealership who now receives federal disability benefits, said he wants medical marijuana legalized because he smoked it three times to relieve chronic pain in his back, hands and feet, and it "did wonders for me."

"It doesn't stop the pain. It just stops it from being an uncomfortable situation," he said, adding that the marijuana was a gift from friends.

Garland said he can't afford the black-market rate for the type of marijuana effective with his pain. It costs \$450 to \$600 an ounce, he said.

The state legislation would allow him to grow marijuana plants, which he said would be more affordable.

Garland said he takes morphine by prescription and hates it: "It steals my life away. It turns me into a zombie. I'm lucky I can remember my own name."

Garland has tried to convince Sen. Larry Bomke, R-Springfield, to support medical marijuana. Bomke said his views on the subject have softened somewhat after talking with Garland.

Bomke looks to law enforcement

However, Bomke still voted against SB 1381. He said he would feel more comfortable voting for the legislation if law enforcement groups supported it. Lang said the Illinois State Police, which had originally opposed the bill, has changed its stance to neutral, but that change couldn't be confirmed with ISP.

DeVarose has been unsuccessful in reaching Rep. Raymond Poe, R-Springfield, who has said he fears legalization would allow medical marijuana to "get into the wrong people's hands."

DeVarose lives with her grandparents, Karen and Butch DeVarose, who oppose illicit drug use. The couple were against their granddaughter using marijuana for her MS symptoms until they saw the effect on her health.

"We are definitely for the medicinal marijuana now," said Karen DeVarose, 59.

Ana DeVarose said lawmakers need to listen to people who have experienced health benefits from smoking or ingesting marijuana.

"It's a matter of opening up the ears and having some compassion for people like me," she said. "I'm a patient. Please help me."

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States that have legalized medical marijuana

The following states have enacted laws that legalized medical marijuana: Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.

All 14 states require proof of residency for someone to be considered a "qualifying patient" for medical marijuana use. Home cultivation is not allowed in New Jersey, which is finalizing rules and about to launch its program.

Source: *ProCon.org*

On the web

More information on medical marijuana in U.S. states: <http://tinyurl.com/y2tyn7g>

Illinois legislation

Senate Bill 1381 would allow a person to receive a "registry identification card" to use marijuana for medicinal purposes if that person has cancer, glaucoma, the AIDS virus, hepatitis C, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Crone's disease, Alzheimer's disease, nail patella or another "chronic or debilitating disease or medical condition" that produces wasting syndrome, seizures, severe muscle spasms or severe nausea. The Illinois Department of Public Health also could approve other conditions.

A patient wanting a card would need written certification from his or her doctor saying the patient would be "likely to receive therapeutic or palliative benefit from the medical use of cannabis." The bill would set up a three-year pilot project that could result in several thousand patients having access to medical marijuana.

Sources: *Illinois General Assembly and Illinois Safe Access*

Photo: David Spencer/The State Journal-Register -- Ana DeVarose uses marijuana to ease symptoms of multiple sclerosis and the side effects of drugs to treat MS.

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