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## Barnidge: Value of medical marijuana is in the eyes of the inhaler

By Tom Barnidge  
Contra Costa Times columnist  
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TO INHALE or not to inhale, that's the question. Whether it's nobler to embrace marijuana as a wonder drug or say out loud what so many others think: What's up with this scam, anyway?

A proposal for a medical marijuana dispensary is the latest controversy to visit Walnut Creek — perhaps it could be part of the new Neiman Marcus store — and awaits a ruling from the City Council. But this issue just as easily could land anywhere in California, which became the first state to legalize medical pot with the passage of Proposition 215 in 1996.

Dale Gieringer, one of the sponsors of Prop. 215, makes no secret of where he stands.

"There are literally thousands and thousands of doctors in California who have recommended marijuana for medicine," he said.

Gieringer, who holds a Ph.D. from Stanford in economics policy analysis, is the director of the California office of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, and he vouches for its medicinal value.

According to a book he cowrote, "The Medical Marijuana Handbook," a few puffs can offer relief from just about every ailment from malaria to athlete's foot. His book claims that marijuana helps regulate immunity, inflammation, trauma, blood pressure, body temperature, gastrointestinal function, analgesia, glaucoma, epilepsy and bone formation.

Bothered by arthritis? Try some marijuana.

Parkinson's disease? Marijuana again.

HIV?

Hepatitis C? Morning sickness? Marijuana is the answer for all three.

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It was mentioned to the good doctor that this one-size-fits-all cure seems vaguely reminiscent of scene from a TV western in which the snake-oil

salesman puts up a tent.

"I'm sort of amazed myself at the list of conditions it treats," he said, unapologetically.

He said he has received countless unsolicited calls from sufferers of all manner of ailments, each swearing to the drug's healing powers.

"We don't recommend smoking so much as vaporizing," Gieringer corrected. "You get a more immediate relief."

Gieringer explained that 12 other states have followed California's lead in legalizing the drug, including most recently Michigan (in 2008) and New Mexico (2007). The rest of the pot club — Vermont, Rhode Island, Montana, Nevada, Colorado, Maine, Oregon, Washington and Alaska — stand ready to testify to the program's value (although we don't recommend calling Alaska to the stand; it thought Sarah Palin was a good idea).

Because a half-full glass is also half-empty, there is a flip side to this discussion. If marijuana's powers are so undeniable, why have 37 states not voted for legalization?

"Because most of those states don't have the initiative process," Gieringer said. "If your state doesn't have the initiative, the decision is in the hands of the legislators, and legislators, as usual, are behind the times when it comes to public opinion."

When it comes to opinions on medical marijuana, though, they are widely divided.

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader, Rep. Ron Paul, D-Tex., and former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders are among those in favor, according to the Web site [ProCon.org](#).

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., former Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist, and Dr. Henry Miller, formerly of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, are opposed.

Commander Norm Wielsch of the Contra Costa County Narcotics Enforcement Team is less absolute. He said

he has no problem with the state law, just with those who abuse it.

"If somebody is very sick, dying from cancer or some incurable illness," he said, "I say give them what they need. But what we've seen from people who have medical marijuana cards is a lot of times they are 18- and 19-year-old kids, seemingly in good health, who say they have migraine headaches or irritable bowel syndrome. Just the other day, we picked up a gang member with a medical marijuana card. Some of these guys are not doing it for medical purposes. They're doing it to get high."

Many of us who sit on the sideline — and we outnumber medical marijuana users in California about 99 to 1 — have a hard time knowing what to make of this.

We're reminded of a college friend who fought off bad colds with two shots of Jack Daniel's and a good night's sleep. He used to refer to this as medical whiskey.

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