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Legalize medical marijuana in Iowa

BY DI EDITORIAL BOARD | OCTOBER 09, 2009 7:20 AM

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Crawfordsville, Iowa, resident Lisa Jackson had been taking a wide assortment of opiates before she experienced what she called a two-week overdose. Not that she'd noticed it; she was in too much pain. Jackson suffers from fibromyalgia, a chronic condition causing extreme body pain and fatigue.

The opiates, legally prescribed painkillers, could not ease her pain, she said. Jackson contemplated suicide until she tried marijuana — which, she said, eased her pain in a way the opiates couldn't.

Her testimony is not unique. Many people suffering from chronic conditions — including several at Wednesday's Iowa Pharmacy Board's medical-marijuana hearing in Iowa City — have testified about marijuana's benefits. Many studies also affirm their sentiment.

Due to marijuana's twin benefits of easing pain and treating illness, the Pharmacy Board should recommend that the Legislature legalize medical marijuana.

Thirteen states have legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes, according to the nonprofit site ProCon.org. States have different rules, but most allow people to obtain a doctor's prescription and purchase the drug at a licensed dispensary or grow it on their own with the state's permission. Iowa's reluctance to follow suit is perplexing, considering the state allows doctors to prescribe highly addictive and possibly dangerous drugs such as oxycodone. An opiate-based drug, oxycodone can cause cardiac problems and loss of hearing.

Oxycodone is one of many opiate-based drugs available with a prescription. Opiates such as oxycodone are derivatives of the same chemicals used to make heroin, perhaps one of the most addictive and dangerous drugs out there.

Marijuana's effects pale in comparison and may provide benefits other than pain relief. Dr. John Stamler, an Iowa City ophthalmologist and clinical researcher, spoke at Wednesday's medical-marijuana hearing, arguing that marijuana could help treat glaucoma. The disease, he said, was the leading cause of blindness in America and caused by pressure on the cornea. Marijuana can relieve that pressure.

Sen. Joe Bolkcom, D-Iowa City, said people suffering from chronic pain and wasting inspired him to introduce legislation earlier this year that would legalize medical marijuana. The bill stalled in the 2009 session, but it remains eligible for next year's session.

Dr. Ron Herman, a clinical associate professor in the UI College of Pharmacy, also testified about marijuana's benefits and side effects. He compiled a series of studies over the course of 30 years and charted different effects among people suffering different ailments. Herman affirmed marijuana's benefits for glaucoma patients but also said those same patients experienced elevated blood pressure. He could provide no evidence, however, that those patients suffered higher incidences of stroke and heart disease. Elevated blood pressure was also not the norm among glaucoma patients, he said. The major side effects were largely mental, Herman said, referring to marijuana's psychotropic effects.

Marijuana does have some dependency issues, but they are minor compared with legal drugs available in the market, according to a 1998 study in the *Lancet*. The study indicated marijuana dependency occurred roughly 10 percent of the time, less than the 15 percent dependency on alcohol and 32 percent dependency on nicotine. Marijuana dependency was also temporary and the result of heavy, chronic use, the study found.

Marijuana, like any mind-altering substance, carries both benefits and consequences. In marijuana's

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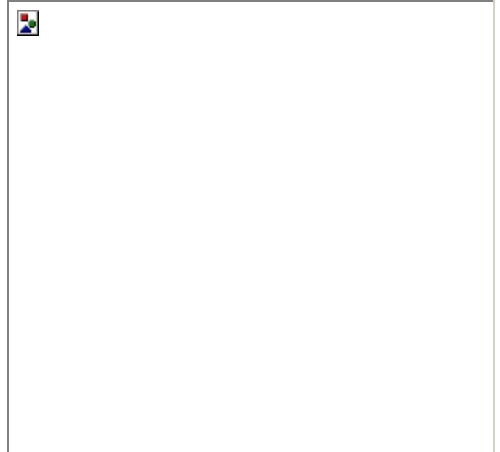
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case, however, such consequences are usually the result of the drug's mind-bending effects. And the medicinal benefits greatly outweigh any negative side effects. Marijuana shows extreme benefits to people with chronic pain and wasting.

The Pharmacy Board should jettison the negative cultural stigma against medical marijuana and recommend its legalization.

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