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Medical marijuana: Science, politics intermingle

by Robyn Rosenthal | Special to the Gazette

Sunday October 19, 2008, 1:15 AM

KALAMAZOO -- If it were just about the science -- and not the politics -- states would allow marijuana for medical purposes, says a leading researcher who was the first to report the drug's effectiveness in treating Lou Gehrig's disease.

"There is actually an overwhelming abundance of evidence to support the medical efficacy of cannabinoids, the active ingredients in marijuana. There is more evidence (of their effectiveness) than there is for many prescription drugs," said Dr. Gregory Carter, of the University of Washington School of Medicine, where he co-directs the Muscular Dystrophy Association-Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) Clinic.

On Nov. 4, Michigan voters will decide on a ballot proposal that would allow some severely ill patients to use marijuana to treat pain, nausea and other symptoms. If voters pass the initiative, Michigan would become the 15th state -- and the first in the Midwest -- to have some kind of medical-marijuana law.

Supporters of Proposal 1 say the initiative would give relief without fear of arrest to people suffering from debilitating diseases.

Difficulties

Opponents say there are synthetic prescription drugs that offer some of the same benefits as marijuana. Citizens Protecting Michigan's Kids, which opposes the initiative, said the proposal could lead to increased teen drug use and hinder police efforts to fight drugs.

Voter passage of the measure would remove state-level penalties for registered patients using marijuana. But the proposal includes no provision to provide access to the drug through the state or pharmacies, and sale of the drug would remain a felony, even to legal users. Supporters hope users would grow their own plants, but in the interim until harvest, the marijuana would have to be bought on the street.

"The unintended consequences (of the initiative) are too grave and too severe," said Appeals Court Judge Bill Schuette, who helped form Citizens Protecting Michigan's Kids. "I'm a judge. This proposal is a doozy."

Pros and cons

The law would allow people with debilitating diseases, such as cancer, glaucoma, AIDS and Alzheimer's disease or those with severe or chronic pain, seizures, nausea and other ailments approved by the state, to grow, possess and use limited amounts of marijuana. The users would need approval from medical doctors, have identification cards and be entered into a registry.

"I can tell you that, as a physician and researcher specializing in the care of patients with severe neuromuscular diseases, including (Lou Gehrig's disease), marijuana works in ways no other medicines do to help these people, being both a safe and effective medicine," Carter said.

Others aren't convinced.

"They're treating it like a panacea that everybody is waiting for, and it's not so," said state Sen. Tom George, a Republican from Texas Township who is also a physician. George opposes the measure.

George, an anesthesiologist, said a synthetic drug called dronabinol (the

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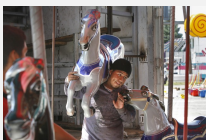
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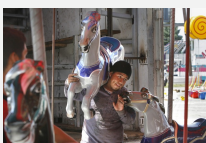
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Kalamazoo police officer punches teen

Sgt. Jeff VanderWieme received a 10-day unpaid suspension last week after he punched a teenager who had spit in his face after officers were called to a scene in April on a report of shots fired.

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commercial name is Marinol) offers benefits similar to those of marijuana.

He said marijuana has many properties not completely known, which could be hazardous to patients. Because patients would be allowed to grow their own marijuana, the drug's purity would not be guaranteed, he said. Neither would it be possible to ensure proper dosage, which could result in overdoses.

Carter said users have found dronabinol too sedating. He also said there has never been a reported overdose of marijuana or dronabinol in humans.

"It's pathetically simple to dose," Carter said.

Groups take sides

More organizations are supporting medicinal marijuana -- or at least urging government support of additional research on the drug.

The American College of Physicians, the second-largest medical society in the United States, is calling for an evidence-based review to determine whether marijuana's classification should be relaxed. The group also argues that all physicians who prescribe medical marijuana and their patients should not face criminal and civil penalties -- regardless state laws.

Former U.S. Surgeon Generals Joycelyn Elders and Jesse Steinfeld have publicly endorsed the medical use of marijuana.

Statewide, however, many health and law-enforcement groups have come out against Proposal 1, including the Michigan State Medical Society and Prosecuting Attorney's Association.

Dianne Byrum, spokeswoman for the Michigan Coalition for Compassionate Care, an advocacy group that gathered signatures to put the question on the November ballot, said the law would apply to a small percentage of the state's population, perhaps less than half of 1 percent, or about 50,000 people.

"The reality is, they're getting it now," Byrum said of people using marijuana for medical reasons. "This gives them protection against arrest and prosecution."

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and other federal agencies are focused on battling large-scale drug-trafficking operations, not small-scale users, said spokesman Rich Isaacson, of the DEA's Detroit office. Medical-marijuana users typically would not be targeted by the DEA, he said.

Not a first

If voters approve the marijuana initiative, it wouldn't be Michigan's first law allowing the drug for medical purposes.

In 1979, the Legislature passed a bill that allowed cancer and glaucoma patients to participate in a federal program that made it legal for those patients to purchase marijuana for therapeutic reasons.

Greg Francisco, who is spearheading the local campaign to pass Proposal 1, said the 1979 law allowed patients to use only federally cultivated marijuana. Francisco said the program ended after about two years because the federal supply was inadequate. He said about 300 people were enrolled in the program.

"The research is there. It works," Francisco said of medical marijuana.

Francisco is a former Bloomingdale Public Schools counselor who resigned from his job in 2006 after he was charged with marijuana possession. The charge was later dropped. Francisco now operates a wool mill.

Five Michigan cities have medical-marijuana ordinances. Law-enforcement officials in two of those communities, Flint and Ann Arbor -- similar in size to Kalamazoo -- said they have not had complaints about medical marijuana since their laws went into effect.

Voters in Flint approved the medical-marijuana ordinance in 2007; Ann Arbor voters passed a similar law in 2004.

On the Web

For more information on the medical-marijuana issue:

Supporting Proposal 1

v <http://stoparrestingpatients.org>.

Opposing Proposal 1

v <http://www.nopotshops.com>.

Debatepedia

v Should marijuana be made legal for medical purposes?

http://tinyurl.com/Debate_MedicalMarijuana.

ProCon.org

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v Should marijuana be a medical option?

http://medical_marijuana.procon.org.

Kalamazoo Gazette series

v In March, the Gazette published a four-part series that investigated the benefits and risks of medical marijuana. Read it here:

http://tinyurl.com/Medical_MarijuanaSeries.

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Posted by **etruex** on 10/19/08 at 3:43AM

Relief from pain and nausea are only two of the medical benefits of marijuana. In 1974, a study in Virginia found that it blocks tumor growth. U.S. officials suppressed this information. Subsequent research in Spain confirmed that marijuana shrinks brain tumors. And a twenty-year population study by UCLA has concluded that smoking marijuana does not cause lung cancer. These tumor-shrinking, anti-carcinogenic properties have also been found effective against prostate and non-melanoma skin cancers. Recent research in Canada indicates that, unlike caffeine, alcohol or opiates, marijuana actually encourages brain cell growth. And an Italian study on pain relief finds it superior to synthetic, non-synergistic, patented cannabinoids like Marinol. If these reports were aired on the NBC Nightly News, we'd see zillions of Marlboro Men screaming for reform. The public is already ahead of the politicians on this issue. Elected officials are too afraid of being labeled 'soft on crime'. What say the Michigan voters?
--Food For Thought

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Posted by **porschegirl** on 10/19/08 at 5:52AM

Before my sister died from pancreatic cancer this last summer, she asked me to help get this passed. The prescription's they gave her knocked her out...she wanted to be awake for as long as possible. Marijuana gave her that option. We were able to ease her pain and still talk and hang on to each other. She felt alone and CRAZY on the morphine and HALODROL(awful stuff.. talk about hallucinations). I saw how marijuana helped her. And I would have done ANYTHING to ease her pain and make her passing easier. So here's what I have to say...you can sit on your ass and watch your loved ones suffer or.... you can go out and vote YES on Proposal 1 Nov. 4th 2008. I choose to Vote YES on Proposal 1 I hope you do also.

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Posted by **team593** on 10/19/08 at 7:52AM

Well folks, lets face the real facts.

1. Governments are not going to leagalize it cause anyone can grow it, therefore the Gov. can't tax it.

2. The mofias' that financially control the Governments wouldn't make anything off of a substance that was made leagal.

3. If marijuana was legal and effective on treating pain problems or other medical ailments then the medical industry would lose a LOT of income/profits.

When will Marijuana be legal? When Legal Marijuana can make as much income/profit as illegal Marijuana does, and the governments can control it.

...like they control it any now...heh,heh,heh.

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Posted by **horseapples** on 10/19/08 at 9:35AM

I strongly suggest that you go to the website of "Law Enforcement Against Prohibition," and see what many from the various law enforcement establishments have to say in support of legal medical marijuana availability." www.leap.cc"

As to Dr Georges' political opposition, sadly he is out of touch with reality on this issue. Get it in perspective:

1. Not ONE known death from use of marijuana.
2. 100,000 deaths in the U.S. from prescription drugs each year.
3. 250,000 deaths from nicotine addiction.
4. Alcohol has left destruction of families, hundreds of thousands of deaths.

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