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Doctor calls pot good medicine

BY JASON KOTOWSKI, Californian staff writer

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Doctors who recommend medical marijuana say it helps treat everything from nausea caused by cancer treatment to spinal pain.

Multiple sclerosis. Anorexia. Anxiety. Muscle spasms. Insomnia.

Dr. Michael Gitter, of Lake Forest, said he's seen medical marijuana help treat all those ailments and more. He believes marijuana should be among the drugs doctors can legally make available to their patients.

In California, medical marijuana is legal under state law. But federal law says marijuana is illegal and the Drug Enforcement Administration can bust medical marijuana dispensaries whenever they want to.

Raids during the summer resulted in the closure of Nature's Medicinal Cooperative, a medical marijuana dispensary in Oildale. All other dispensaries in the county closed in the following months because the owners feared being raided and arrested.

Doctors can legally write a recommendation for medical marijuana for qualified patients.

Gitter said the amount of research he's seen and the stories he's heard from other doctors, as well as his own experience, have him convinced marijuana is a worthwhile drug in treating various ailments.

"It has a good safety profile and is very effective for many conditions," Gitter said. "I wouldn't say there are a lot of drawbacks."

The DEA disagrees. Stephen Peterson, resident agent in charge of the DEA in Bakersfield, has said marijuana isn't harmless and use of the drug often leads to other types of substance abuse.

DEA assistant special agent in charge Gordon Taylor has said the medical marijuana dispensaries he has seen are mostly used by young people, most of whom are able-bodied and in some cases even physically fit. The possession, cultivation or distribution of marijuana for any purpose is illegal under federal law, except for approved scientific research, Taylor has said.

Gitter said marijuana is sometimes abused by people who don't need it, but no more than any other drug a doctor recommends or prescribes.

"Every time a doctor writes a prescription or a recommendation there will be times when his judgment is off or patients are manipulative," Gitter said.

That's no reason, however, for marijuana to be unavailable, Gitter said.

"With its broad range of uses, it's one of the most useful medicines I've come across," he said.

Numerous calls made to local doctors were either not returned or the doctors declined to comment.

District Attorney Ed Jagels said at a Kern County supervisors meeting earlier this month that the county should either repeal the marijuana dispensary ordinance or ban dispensaries, cooperatives and collectives. County Counsel Bernard Barmann said at the meeting that his office will come back with another report and ask supervisors to take an official stance on the issue.

For now, there's no place in the county where marijuana can be legally purchased under state law.

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