

Medical Marijuana Debate Pains Homemaker

Kendrick Marshall
March 24, 2007
News-Sun

Lisa Van Camp has spent the majority of her adult life in excruciating pain.

The Lindenhurst homemaker has tried everything from over-the-counter pills to doctor-recommended prescriptions in an effort to alleviate severe pain caused by arthritis and a rare tissue disorder called Dercum's disease.

Van Camp has now come to the realization that her pain will never go away without the help of a drug the government won't let her have.

Even though Van Camp knows medical marijuana will assist in controlling the pain she has had to endure for than 25 years, the fear of imprisonment has all but restricted her from taking the chance of further damaging her life.

"I want to relieve this pain that I have suffered with for so long, but I don't want to run the risk of being arrested and taken to jail," a distraught Van Camp told the News-Sun. She admitted she used marijuana for a short period before stopping.

"Even though I know medical marijuana can help me, I also know it is illegal," she added. "I don't want to break the law."

Although federal law makes patients who use doctor-recommended medical marijuana criminals, some states have adopted laws protecting patients for whom research proves the medicine is safe and effective in patients who are terminally ill.

The Illinois Senate Public Health Committee recently passed the medical marijuana bill, SB 650, by a 6-4 vote after receiving written and oral testimony from medical professionals and patients.

The bill, introduced by Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago, is one of about a dozen medical marijuana bills currently under consideration by 11 state legislatures across the nation.

Medical experts said they expect the bill, which would protect patients like Van Camp who use medical marijuana from being arrested, to head to the Senate floor for another vote next month.

One Lake County physician says she is in favor of the bill that would allow seriously ill patients to use marijuana for medical purposes.

Dr. Zulima Hurtado, a clinical psychiatrist in Round Lake, submitted a written testimony to the Senate committee, claiming medical marijuana would be beneficial for patients who suffer from life-threatening illnesses such as AIDS, diabetes and hepatitis.

Hurtado said her dealings with treating patients indicated decisions for people to use the drug should be made by doctors and patients.

"I hope this opens the door for people who don't understand how medical marijuana can assist in the healing process of patients," Hurtado said. "It is very important that people know it can be beneficial like any other medicine."

Even though medical opinion is still divided on whether marijuana has therapeutic or medicinal value, the federal government believes otherwise. The Food and Drug Administration has not approved marijuana for medical uses and the Bush administration has opposed legislation that would allow it.

Two years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the federal government can still ban possession of the drug in states that have eliminated sanctions for its use.

Hurtado is confident Illinois officials will approve the legislation.

"It is ironic and sadly painful to me that oftentimes the FDA-approved drugs used to treat the pain and suffering associated with such illnesses are frequently ineffective and can be potentially lethal," Hurtado said.

Hurtado said marijuana has few side effects compared to prescription medications, which can trigger an extended period of illness.

Van Camp takes 20 milligrams of Oxycontin three times a day, in addition to other painkillers, to help manage her pain. She would use traditional over-the-counter drugs, but those cause stomach bleeding.

"The fact is that it is perfectly legal for doctors to prescribe all these drugs that are not only highly addictive, but have many unpleasant side effects," Van Camp said. "Yet, the fact that medical marijuana remains illegal is beyond reasoning. I can't struggle to live like this."