

## **OPED: Medical Use of Marijuana Should Be Legalized**

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April 3, 2007

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

You probably know me as a talk show host and, perhaps, as someone who for several years has spoken out about my use of medical marijuana for the pain caused by multiple sclerosis. That surprised a few people, but recent research has proved that I was right: right about marijuana's medical benefits and right about how urgent it is for states to change their laws so that sick people aren't treated as criminals. The Illinois General Assembly is considering such a change right now.

If you see me on television [10 a.m. weekdays on Channel 4 in St. Louis], I look healthy. What you don't see is the mind-numbing pain searing through my legs like hot poker.

My doctors wrote me prescriptions for some of the strongest painkillers available. I took Percocet, Vicodin and Oxycontin on a regular basis, knowingly risking overdose just trying to make the pain bearable. But these powerful, expensive drugs brought me no relief. I couldn't sleep, I was agitated, my legs kicked involuntarily in bed and the pain was so bad I found myself crying in the middle of the night.

All these heavy-duty narcotics made me nearly incoherent. I couldn't take them when I had to work, because they turned me into a zombie. Worse, these drugs are highly addictive, and one thing I knew was that I didn't want to become a junkie.

When someone suggested I try marijuana, I was skeptical. But I also was desperate. To my amazement, it worked after the legal drugs had failed. Three puffs and within minutes the excruciating pain in my legs subsided. I had my first restful sleep in months.

I am not alone. A new study from the University of California, published in February in the highly regarded medical journal *Neurology*, leaves no doubt about that.

You see, people with MS suffer from a particular type of pain called neuropathic pain: pain caused by damage to the nerves. It's common in MS but also in many other illnesses, including diabetes and HIV/AIDS. It's typically a burning or stabbing sensation, and conventional pain drugs don't help much, whatever the specific illness.

The new study, conducted by Dr. Donald Abrams, looked at neuropathic pain in HIV/AIDS patients. About one-third of people with HIV eventually suffer this kind of pain, and there are no FDA-approved treatments. For some it gets so bad that they can't walk.

This was what is known as a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial, the "gold standard" of medical research. And marijuana worked. The very first marijuana cigarette reduced the pain by an average of 72 percent, without serious side effects.

What makes this even more impressive is that U.S. researchers studying marijuana are required to use marijuana supplied by the federal government, marijuana that is famous for its poor quality and weakness. So there is every reason to believe that studies such as this one underestimate the potential relief that high-quality marijuana could provide.

In my case, medical marijuana has allowed me to live a productive, fruitful life despite having multiple sclerosis. Many thousands of others all over this country — less well-known than me but whose stories are just as real — have experienced the same thing.

Here's what's shocking: The U.S. government knows marijuana works as a medicine. Our government actually provides medical marijuana each month to five patients in a program that started about 25 years ago but was closed to new patients in 1992. One of the patients in that program, Florida stockbroker Irvin Rosenfeld, was a guest on my show two years ago. If federal officials come to town to tell you there's no evidence marijuana is a safe, effective medicine, know this: They're lying, and they know it.

Still, 39 states subject patients with illnesses like MS, cancer or HIV/AIDS to arrest and jail for using medical marijuana, even if their doctor has recommended it. It's long past time for that to change.

Illinois state Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago, has introduced a bill — SB 650 — to protect patients like me from arrest and jail for using medical marijuana when it's recommended by a physician. Similar laws are working well in 11 states right now.

The General Assembly should pass the medical marijuana bill without delay. Sick people shouldn't be treated as criminals.

Television talk show host Montel Williams is the author, with Lawrence Grobel, of "Climbing Higher" and other books.