

## **OPEd: Research, Not Rhetoric: Marijuana Can Save Lives**

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As Illinois legislators prepare to debate a new, practical plan for legalizing the medical use of marijuana (the Legislature actually passed a medical marijuana bill in 1971 but that flawed measure was never put into practice), they should consider a new study, published in the journal *Neurology* last month.

That Feb. 13 study, conducted by Dr. Donald Abrams of the University of California at San Francisco, found smoked marijuana to be safe and effective at treating peripheral neuropathy, which causes great suffering among HIV/AIDS patients. This type of pain, caused by damage to the nerves, can make patients feel like their feet and hands are on fire, or being stabbed with a knife. Similar pain occurs in a number of other illnesses, including multiple sclerosis and diabetes, and responds poorly to conventional pain medications — even addictive, dangerous narcotics.

Abrams' study matches my own experience in studying the natural history of AIDS. This experience has led me to focus on complementary medications for treatment of peripheral neuropathy, taking leads from my own patients who have used marijuana for pain relief even though this exposed them to possible arrest and imprisonment.

The federal government has long claimed that — as a 2003 White House press release put it — "research has not demonstrated that smoked marijuana is safe and effective medicine." The study from Abrams and colleagues demolishes that claim and underlines the urgent need for federal and state governments to change their policies.

In this randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial (the design that's considered the "gold standard" of medical research), a majority of patients had a greater than 30 percent reduction in pain after smoking marijuana. For many, that level of relief means having a significantly improved quality of life, and for some it actually permits return to careers cut short by HIV infection.

This is only the latest in a growing accumulation of research showing that medical marijuana can provide real — sometimes even lifesaving — benefits. In a study published last year of patients being treated for the hepatitis C virus, those using marijuana to curb the nausea and other noxious side effects of anti-hepatitis drugs were significantly more likely to complete their treatment. As a result, the marijuana-using patients were three times more likely to clear the deadly hepatitis C virus from their bodies — in plain English, to be cured — than those not using marijuana.

While we don't yet have a way of ridding the body of HIV, there is strong evidence that continuing on treatment without interruption increases one's chances of keeping the virus

under control. That translates directly to increased survival. And again, there is published evidence that use of medical marijuana to relieve nausea and other treatment side effects can help HIV/AIDS patients stick to their regimens.

Does all this sound too good to be true? That might be because our government spends many billions of dollars in its "War on Drugs" to make us believe that marijuana is an addictive and dangerous drug and actively spreads disinformation about its medical usefulness.

Clearly, the White House and its drug czar, John Walters, should abandon their rigid, unscientific rejection of medical marijuana and start reshaping federal policy to match medical reality. And if they won't act, Congress should. There are a number of actions Congress can take to put federal medical marijuana policy on a path toward sanity.

The first, and simplest, is to prohibit the Drug Enforcement Administration from spending money to raid and arrest medical marijuana patients and caregivers in the 11 states where the medical use of marijuana is legal under state law. This would remove the cloud of fear that now hangs over hundreds of thousands of desperately ill Americans and those who care for them.

But that should be just the beginning. Everything about federal medical marijuana policy should be reconsidered, based on science, common sense, and simple human decency.

There is no longer any doubt that marijuana can be a useful medicine for some very ill patients, a medicine that can literally help people stay alive. So even as we await federal action, Illinois — where the Senate Public Health Committee will hold a hearing on the medical marijuana bill Tuesday — should create a workable medical marijuana program, like those now in place in 11 states.

It is time to end our government's war on the sick and dying.

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