

Medical cannabis should be approved for the seriously ill - Rockford

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Julie Falco eats brownies or cookies with cannabis baked in them three times a day to help her deal with multiple sclerosis.

"I was taking a multitude of medications and they made me feel sick," the 44-year-old Chicago woman said in a telephone interview Thursday. She tried cannabis and it worked for her when nothing else would. That's not legal in Illinois, but should be.

Illinois lawmakers have discussed and voted on medical cannabis legislation for years, but legislation has never passed both chambers of the General Assembly.

There was new hope this year when in May the Senate approved Senate Bill 1381, the Compassionate Use of Medical Cannabis Pilot Program Act. The lone Republican to vote for the measure was Sen. Dave Syverson of Rockford.

In May it passed in the House Human Services Committee, though it has not been brought up for a full vote as of yet. We'd like to see it voted on this year and think the Obama administration's decision not to prosecute users and suppliers of medical cannabis in states where it's been legalized should encourage lawmakers.

The Obama order is a reversal from what was going on during the Bush administration when federal agents raided medical cannabis distributors.

"I hope this will show (Illinois lawmakers) that they can calm down," Falco said. "This is the right thing to do. This might finally get them to wake up and take care of the seriously ill in the state."

Thirteen states do that. Michigan was the most recent and the first in the Midwest. Medical cannabis is not legal in Maryland, but you can present a medical defense and qualify for reduced penalties. Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle recently said he supports medical cannabis if the law is written so it restricts use to those who have a doctor's prescription.

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and New Jersey also are considering medical cannabis legislation. The Iowa Board of Pharmacy is conducting public hearings on whether cannabis should be reclassified to allow for medical use.

Falco pointed out that Illinois' bill is the most restrictive bill of the states that have legalized cannabis.

The Illinois legislation sets out specific parameters. SB 1381 would create a three-year test program administered by the Illinois Department of Public Health. Patients would need written certification from a doctor. A patient can possess up to seven dried cannabis plants and two ounces of dried usable cannabis.

Not just anyone with a headache can go to a doctor and ask for prescription. The program is meant for those with cancer, HIV, Crohn's disease or other debilitating illnesses such as Falco's multiple sclerosis.

Most patients will be mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers who are in so much pain that nothing else will work.

Falco has been a leading advocate for a sane medical cannabis law for five years. Notice that throughout this editorial we've used the word cannabis rather than the more popular marijuana. Falco considers marijuana slang and prejudicial. She says the negativity associated with the word conjures up stereotypes that don't fit with the real suffering that goes on among the seriously ill.

Bruce Mirken, director of communications for the Marijuana Policy Project in Washington, said Falco is not alone in her feeling about the word marijuana. He said the word "was brought into use by the forces seeking to ban it 80 or so years ago.

"On the other hand, most people really have no memory of that, it's just the word they know, while cannabis is unfamiliar to most Americans. So we've generally stuck with the terminology that's familiar to people."

The word cannabis also relates to the word endocannabinoids, which are natural brain compounds similar to THC, the active ingredient in cannabis.

Endocannabinoids affect our physiological processes including appetite, memory and pain. It's ironic the same federal government that has made criminals out of cannabis users was awarded a patent in 2003 for the medical use of the plant.

"They (government officials) know it's beneficial," Falco said.

Most people think cannabis for medicinal purposes should be legal. A poll by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. of Washington, D.C., in 2008 showed 68 percent of Illinoisans support it. In the Rock River Valley, 65 percent support it.

Seriously ill people in Illinois have waited long enough. It's time lawmakers gave them another option to deal with their pain.

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