

The Medicinal Use of Marijuana: An Intimate Debate Case

by

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Introduction

Marijuana is classified as a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act. Accordingly it is currently legislated as having “no accepted medical use in treatment in the United States.” At the federal level, marijuana can be used for research purposes only and it is otherwise illegal to possess. However it is commonly argued that marijuana can be effectively used to manage a host of medical problems. The past few decades have seen a number of initiatives that have resulted in legalization for medical use at the state level. The resulting tension between federal and state authority has led to a number of high profile confrontations between the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and hospices openly dispensing marijuana in cooperation with state and local agencies.

Should the use of marijuana be legalized for medical purposes, yes or no? Before coming to a considered opinion regarding this controversial issue, you will examine two polarized positions during a classroom debate, making use of the instructional sheets listed below. Your instructor will provide you with ground rules for the debate.

Pro—Marijuana should be legalized for medicinal purposes

- Personal Story: “Terminal Cancer”
- Pro Information Sheet

Con—Marijuana should NOT be legalized for medicinal purposes

- Personal Story: “The Story of the Lotus Eaters”
- Con Information Sheet

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“Terminal Cancer” by Anonymous

“In October ’05, my mother, a 74 year old elegant lady full of beauty, died due to the effects of liver, lung and breast cancer.... The world came crashing down in February ’05 when she sat me down and gave me the worst possible news. There was nothing the docs could do.

“On October 4th, my 40th birthday, my mom was unable to attend my birthday dinner. On October 7th, the family was convened for a meeting with a social worker from the Hospice. I had no idea what ‘Hospice’ was and was shocked to my foundations when this fellow started talking funeral homes and cremation services for my mom, basically preparing us for her death. I decided I had heard enough and went upstairs to where my mom was lying. She was once this beautiful creature that never seemed to age, and here she was in bed lying in a fetal position, reduced to a wisp, looking miserable and frightened. There’s no feeling more helpless than watching your mom starve to death in front of your eyes knowing there’s nothing ‘modern medicine’ can do for her except give her morphine via a convenient IV, providing the zoned out opiated comfort of lying in a faux warm pool of sensory deprivation as it accelerates and fogs her remaining days on Earth.

“October 7th was a Friday and she looked like she would not make it through the weekend. I told her ‘I have something in the truck that might help you....’

“Soon afterward I let her take her first tiny, gentle breaths of marijuana. Only seconds later, she began rubbing her stomach. I asked her how she felt. ‘I feel a little woozy but my stomach feels better!’ After eating her first food in a while, she regained some strength and instead of needing help to get to the bathroom, got up under her own power and began walking herself. Her voice started sounding better; the change in her was nothing short of a miracle. With just a few breaths of MJ vapor every four or six hours, she eliminated her nausea, increased her appetite, was able to keep the food she ate down, and turned back on her will to live. MJ made whatever pain she was feeling go away for awhile naturally, not a single contra-indication or harmful side effect to the body. Most importantly of all, every bit of anxiety she was feeling about this whole cancer ordeal was gone. Gone. What pill can Glaxo possibly create in a lab that effectively treats so many things at once, within seconds of taking, while being so gentle to the body? When her friends came by to visit she would say ‘I’m on pot and it’s great!’

“Mom got every piece of information about the world from Fox News and Rush Limbaugh, much to the chagrin of most of the family, but she didn’t need convincing to come to the conclusion that everything she’d ever been told about marijuana during the course of her life had been a long succession of smokescreens designed to veil its true worth to humanity.... She was talking coherently up until the final day.... For the family it was a great relief to have that extra peace and comfort knowing that she died an elegant, beautiful, graceful death instead of a morphine drip, ‘out of it’ dirty death.”

Adapted from Marijuana: The Forbidden Medicine RxMarijuana.com <http://www.rxmarijuana.com/shared.htm>



Pro: Marijuana Should Be Legalized for Medical Purposes

Foremost in our society, marijuana is known as a recreational drug. However, for the people in the United States who suffer from diseases and conditions like cancer, depression, anxiety, stress, attention deficit disorder, epilepsy, migraines, meningitis and chronic pain, marijuana may appeal to them as a medicinal drug. Many Americans believe that if this drug can relieve the pain and suffering of so many, then it needs to be considered for a medical purpose.

1. In 1972, after reviewing the scientific evidence, the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse concluded that while marijuana was not entirely safe, its dangers had been grossly inflated. Since then, researchers have conducted thousands of studies of humans, animals, and cell cultures, none of which expose any findings significantly different from those expressed by the National Commission in 1972. In 1995, based on thirty years of scientific research, editors of the British medical journal *Lancet* concluded that “the smoking of cannabis, even long term, is not harmful to health.”
2. In a 2003 article, the American Civil Liberties Union explains that no one has ever died from an overdose from marijuana used as a recreational or medicinal drug.
3. According to the Drug Policy Alliance, marijuana has been shown to be effective in lessening the nausea induced by cancer chemotherapy, rousing appetite in AIDS patients, and reducing intraocular pressure in people with glaucoma. There is also substantial evidence that marijuana reduces muscle spasticity in patients with neurological disorders. A synthetic capsule is available by prescription only, but it is not as effective as smoked marijuana for many patients. Pure THC may also produce more unpleasant psychoactive side effects than smoked marijuana.
4. In regards to cancer, marijuana can stimulate the appetite and alleviate nausea and vomiting, which are common side effects of chemotherapy treatment.
5. In the book *The Emperor Wears No Clothes*, Jack Herer states that researchers at the Medical College of Virginia discovered that cannabis (marijuana) is an incredibly successful herb for reducing many types of tumors, both benign and malignant.
6. In the article “Hemp and Health,” Nelson reports that THC and CBN (the primary chemicals in marijuana) have inhibited primary tumor growth from 25 to 82% and increased the life expectancy of cancerous mice to the same extent. The anti tumor property of THC and CBN is very selective, as it reduces tumor cells without damaging normal cells.
7. Joycelyn Elders, M.D. wrote in a 3/26/04 editorial published in the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island: “The evidence is overwhelming that marijuana can relieve certain types of pain, nausea, vomiting and other symptoms caused by such illnesses as multiple sclerosis, cancer and AIDS—or by the harsh drugs sometimes used to treat them. And it can do so with remarkable safety. Indeed, marijuana is less toxic than many of the drugs that physicians prescribe every day.”
8. The U.K.’s Medicinal Cannabis Research Foundation published on their website in November, 2001 that medicinal use of marijuana could provide a dramatic improvement in quality of life for people with: AIDS wasting syndrome, Glaucoma, Alzheimer’s disease, Hypertension, Arthritis, Multiple sclerosis, Asthma, Nail Patella Syndrome, Brain injury/stroke, Nausea (which accompanies chemotherapy), Crohn’s/colitis, Chronic pain, Depression/Mental illness, Phantom limb pain, Eating disorders, Migraine, Epilepsy, Spinal cord injury, Fibromyalgia, and Tourette’s syndrome. This improvement in quality of life results from marijuana’s lessening effect of chronic pain, spasm, bladder dysfunction and nausea.

9. Researchers from GW Pharmaceuticals wrote in an article published in the *Journal of Cannabis Therapeutics* that in practice it has been found that, compared to the equivalent amount of cannabinoid given as a single chemical entity such as Marinol, extracts of cannabis offer greater relief of pain (Pharmaceutical-quality Marinol provides standardized THC concentrations).
10. Cannabinoids taken by mouth begin working more gradually and are absorbed more unpredictably than inhaled marijuana, so many patients prefer the latter, University of Montreal pharmacologist Mohamed Ben Amar wrote in a paper posted in March by the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*.
11. Marijuana is the most popular illegal drug in the United States today, states the Drug Policy Alliance. It has been said that people who have used drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and LSD, are likely to have also used marijuana. Yet most marijuana users never use any other illegal drug. Indeed, for the large majority of people, marijuana is a finishing point rather than a gateway drug.
12. None of the medical tests, as per the Drug Policy Alliance, presently utilized to detect brain damage in humans have found harm from marijuana, even from long term high-dose use. An early study detailed brain damage in rhesus monkeys after six months exposure to high concentrations of marijuana smoke. In a recent, more carefully conducted study, researchers failed to find evidence of brain abnormality in monkeys that were forced to inhale the equivalent of four to five marijuana cigarettes every day for a year. The claim that marijuana kills brain cells originated from a provisional report dating back a quarter of a century that has not been sufficiently corroborated.



“The Story of the Lotus Eaters” by Anonymous

“I am a marijuana addict because when using pot, it was the most important thing in my life. More important than anybody or anything. It helped to suppress all the inadequacies I felt. It helped me not to feel the pain of not living up to expectations. It enabled me not to worry about anything. It helped me to not care about the things I really cared about. It enabled me to stay in my own little world and not deal with emotional feelings that would continually come up when I wasn’t smoking. It would drive the fear away, but after a while, the fear would return.

“Pot helped me not worry about not having a relationship with women, even though I wanted this to happen. Because of negative feelings about myself, I always thought deep down that I was worthless and didn’t deserve to be happy. Instead of dealing with these issues I would smoke pot and the feelings would go away. Therefore, I never learned very many social skills or problem solving skills.

“Problems would come up and they would seem too huge to deal with. I would smoke pot and look for the answers after smoking, because then the problems seemed smaller. In reality, they were only day to day issues that could be resolved if dealt with, instead of running away from them. I would smoke and not deal with the problems and let them fester inside until I thought, ‘I just can’t handle it.’ I would try not to think about them, or go somewhere I could start all over, escape, and hope that would teach me how to deal with them the next time. But the next time, they would continue and I would do the same thing, over and over, until it was killing me.

“Later, I started to turn to other things (alcohol, cocaine, gambling) in the hope that these things would give me pleasure, or at least let me not care about the problems that followed me wherever I went, and that these feelings I carried around would go away. They didn’t.”

Adapted from Marijuana Anonymous World Services <http://www.marijuana-anonymous.org/>



Con: Marijuana Should Not Be Legalized for Medical Purposes

Marijuana is known as a recreational drug. However, for the many people in the United States who suffer from a number of diseases, marijuana may appeal to them as a medicinal drug. This is a controversial issue because the U.S. government has placed the “war on drugs” high on its domestic priorities list and making marijuana legal to serve a medical function could send mixed signals to the public. Below are strong arguments why marijuana should not be legalized for medical purposes.

1. According to the article “Signs of Marijuana Addiction and Abuse,” short term side-effects of Marijuana include:
 - sleepiness
 - difficulty keeping track of time
 - reduced ability to perform tasks requiring concentration and coordination, such as driving a car
 - increased heart rate
 - potential cardiac dangers for those with preexisting heart disease
 - bloodshot eyes
 - dry mouth and throat
 - decreased social inhibitions
 - paranoia, hallucinations
 - impaired or reduced short-term memory
 - impaired or reduced comprehension
 - altered motivation and cognition, making the acquisition of new information difficult
 - psychological dependence
 - impairments in learning and memory, perception, and judgment—difficulty speaking, listening effectively, thinking, retaining knowledge, problem solving, and forming concepts
 - intense anxiety or panic attacks
2. Long-term effects of marijuana, as per “Signs of Marijuana Addiction and Abuse,” are:
 - enhanced cancer risk
 - decrease in testosterone levels and lower sperm counts for men
 - increase in testosterone levels for women and increased risk of infertility
 - diminished or extinguished sexual pleasure
 - psychological dependence requiring more of the drug to get the same effect
3. One study has indicated that a user’s risk of heart attack more than quadruples in the first hour after smoking marijuana, states the National Institute of Drug Abuse. The researchers suggest that such an effect might occur from marijuana’s effects on blood pressure and heart rate and reduced oxygen-carrying capacity of blood.
4. According to information on the National Institute of Drug Abuse website, researchers have found that THC changes the manner in which sensory information gets into and is acted upon by the hippocampus. This is a component of the brain’s limbic system that is imperative for learning, memory, and the integration of sensory experiences with emotions and motivations. Investigations have shown that neurons in the information processing system of the hippocampus and the activity of the nerve fibers are suppressed by THC. In addition, researchers have determined that learned behaviors, which depend on the hippocampus, also deteriorate. Recent research findings also indicate that long-term use of marijuana produces changes in the brain similar to those seen after long-term use of other major drugs of abuse.

5. Someone who smokes marijuana regularly may have many of the same respiratory problems that tobacco smokers have, as ascertained by the National Institute of Drug Abuse. These individuals may have daily cough and phlegm, symptoms of chronic bronchitis, and more frequent chest colds. Continuing to smoke marijuana can lead to abnormal functioning of lung tissue injured or destroyed by marijuana smoke.
6. As maintained in *Marijuana Myths and Facts*, the amount of tar inhaled by marijuana smokers and the level of carbon monoxide absorbed are three to five times greater than among tobacco smokers. This may be due to the marijuana users inhaling more deeply and holding the smoke in the lungs.
7. Regular use of cannabis can lead to psychological habituation for some people making it difficult for them to quit. According to Erowid, studies have estimated that between 5% and 10% of those who try smoking marijuana once will become daily users sometime during their life, but most of these smokers will have given up the habit by age 30 and few remain daily smokers after age 40. Most people do not experience signs of physical addiction, but with regular daily use, mild to medium withdrawal symptoms usually occur for less than a week, but can extend for as long as six weeks.
8. Several studies have indicated that cannabis use (like many other strong psychoactive drugs) can precipitate neuroses or psychoses in those who are already at risk.
9. Walters states in “Happy Trails Paraphernalia Pushers” that making medicinal marijuana legal would destroy the societal norm that drug use is dangerous. It would undercut the goals of stopping the initiation of drug use to thwart addiction.
10. Marijuana is a gateway drug that can lead to the eventual use of “harder” drugs such as cocaine or heroin.
11. In the article “Marijuana Myths, Marijuana Facts,” Zimmer states that used over time, marijuana permanently alters brain structure and function, causing memory loss, cognitive impairment, personality deterioration, and reduced productivity.
12. A critical con argument in this debate is that if marijuana use is legalized, there is no way to limit its availability to the prescription holders. It will be readily accessible to all of their friends, family and children.

