

Medical marijuana coming to Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

Expanded use of marijuana on a legal, or at least non-criminal, basis seems to be sweeping the country, and will reach Illinois this year, or sometime soon thereafter. Does anyone really care that much anymore?

The term marijuana is Mexican in origin and refers to any of three subspecies of the cannabis plant. Cannabis has been used for recreational, industrial and therapeutic purposes for thousands of years.

In my home county of Stark, cannabis was grown during World War II to make rope for the Navy; it was called hemp around here. According to NORML, a national group that supports legalization of marijuana, 98 percent of all the marijuana that is destroyed by law enforcement along roadsides is of this industrial sort, which is low in chemical properties and has no value for human use.

Again according to NORML, marijuana is the third most popular recreational drug after alcohol and tobacco and has been tried at some point by almost one in three Americans.

When I was in college, lo those many years ago, beer was the drug of choice, but I recall trying to smoke a joint of marijuana once. Never having smoked even a cigarette, I didn't know how to inhale, and so I still don't know if the weed has any kick or whatever.

Marijuana was declared a Schedule I serious illegal drug by the federal government in 1937, and it is still thus on the books today.

In recent years, 17 states have declared marijuana legal for medical purposes and this past election, Colorado and Washington State voted to legalize the drug for recreational use.

Apparently the federal government will not go after recreational users in those states, yet the federal government's ban on the use of marijuana nationwide is unclear in the face of the actions by so many states.

The City of Chicago has decriminalized the use of marijuana. That is, users caught in the act will be fined, rather than arrested, jailed and prosecuted.

The Illinois Senate earlier voted in favor of a bill that would legalize the medical use of marijuana, and sponsors in the Illinois House are gearing up for a big push to do the same this year, after failing in the past three years.

A recent Gallup Poll showed that public attitudes on a national basis have changed dramatically since the 1970s, when opposition to legalizing the drug was strong. In Gallup's December poll, half favored legalizing marijuana for recreational purposes. A recent CBS poll found that 77 percent were okay with marijuana for medicinal purposes.

Here the issue becomes more complicated. Will the medicinal use be tightly regulated as to who can grow and dispense the drug? And will the use be for a short list of illnesses or, as in California, where just about anyone can get a prescription, and most use is probably for recreational purposes?

The Illinois legislation for this year is still being shaped, but long-time sponsor state Rep. Lou Lang (D-Skokie) has always contended the Illinois bill would strictly regulate marijuana's use.

Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police executive director John Kennedy and his group strongly oppose the bills that have been proposed in Illinois in the past.

Kennedy worries, for example, about a high schooler who has been prescribed the drug for medicinal purposes and brings his marijuana on the school grounds.

“It’s a big problem,” says Kennedy.

NORML seems to think that marijuana is good for just about anything that ails you. From what I have read, strong proof for medical benefit from use of the drug is somewhat limited. Apparently it is useful, for example, in boosting appetite and relieving nausea.

There appears to be some indication that heavy and prolonged use is bad for one, as is sure the case with alcohol and maybe all drugs.

Based on rapidly changing attitudes toward marijuana, the drug will probably be legally available for anyone’s use in a couple of decades. For example, bills to legalize marijuana have begun circulating in Congress, which is often a harbinger of change down the road.

As a civil libertarian, I have never been strong for government prohibitions on what others can do. Better on balance, I think, in regard drugs to control, tax, and treat.

If you want to weigh in on this issue, now is the time to do so. And your area legislators are as quick as an email away. Making your voice heard has never been easier.