Medical Marijuana: The Pain of Prohibition

by Salim Muwakkil; Published on Wednesday, December 29, 2004 by CommonDreams.org:

Last week we learned that the pain relief drug naproxen, sold as Aleve, was found in a study to increase the risk of heart problems. This news followed a flow of bad PR on the pharmaceutical front about other pain relievers.

But while we openly discuss the lethal potential of legal pain relievers, shouldn’t we question why one the least lethal medications remains illegal.

That medication is marijuana.

Numerous published studies suggest that cannabis (the scientific term for marijuana) has medical value in treating patients with serious illnesses such as AIDS, glaucoma, cancer, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy and, especially, chronic pain. What’s more, 11 states have passed laws legalizing medical marijuana since 1966 and national polls reveal a wide majority support those laws. The latest national poll, conducted by the AARP, focused on older Americans and found that nearly 75 percent support legalizing medical marijuana.

Despite all of that, the federal government opposes therapeutic use of the drug. This opposition seems particularly irrational considering the troubled safety record of drugs already approved by the Food and Drug Administration. There are no known lethal side effects to marijuana use.

The U.S. Supreme Court currently is weighing the objections of the government against the states’ rights to allow the use of medical marijuana.

Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical industry is being rolled by a barrage of negative news about some of its most profitable commodities. First there was Vioxx, which was pulled off the market in October because of data linking it to heart problems. Celebrex and Bextra, two drugs in the Vioxx family of so-called Cox-II drugs, were later found to pose the same risks.

These COX-II medications, a class of non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drugs or NSAIDs, had become very popular among those suffering chronic pain because they are gentler on the stomach than other NSAIDs.

With the latest findings about naproxen, those suffering from chronic pain confront a major dilemma: is pain relief worth the increased risk of a heart attack or stroke? Do those who seek pain relief through medical marijuana avoid this particular dilemma?
Well, according to two government studies, the risks associated with cannabis use are much less than for other drugs.

One of the most exhaustive investigations into cannabis took place between 1986 and 1988, during the “Just Say No” regime of President Ronald Reagan. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) studied evidence from doctors, patients and thousands of pages of documentation.

The conclusion reached by the DEA’s administrative judge, Francis J. Young, confounded expectations and was severely downplayed in the media. “Nearly all medicines have toxic potentially lethal effects,” Young said in summing up the report. “But marijuana is not such a substance… Marijuana, in its natural form, is one of the safest active substances known to man. By any measure of rational analysis marijuana can be safely used within a supervised routine of medical care,” Young added.

The same government that commissioned the study assiduously ignored it.

In 1999, the government’s Institute of Medicine published a comprehensive report that focused more specifically on questions about medical marijuana. Among other things, the study concluded, “the accumulated data indicate a potential therapeutic value for cannabinoid drugs, particularly for symptoms such as pain relief, control of nausea and vomiting and appetite stimulation.” It offered a cautious endorsement of medical marijuana.

But marijuana seldom receives a sober assessment from U.S. lawmakers. Instead our representatives seem hell bent on demonizing the drug. It’s as if they’re engaged in some undeclared war against rationality.

Other nations, less inhibited by these irrational fears, have taken steps to explore more of the drug’s potential benefits. The latest news comes from the Israeli army, which has announced it will treat soldiers traumatized by combat with cannabis therapy.

According to Reuters, Delta-9 tetrohydrocannabinal (THC), the active ingredient found in cannabis, will be administered to selected soldiers over the next several months in an experimental effort to fight post-traumatic stress disorder. The news agency quoted Raphael Mechoulam of Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, the chief researcher behind the unique project (and the scientist who first isolated THC), who said the chemical could help relieve stress by suppressing unwanted memories.

“The effects of THC on stress were first discovered by Germany’s Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry in 2002,” Reuters reported. “Scientists tested it on mice and found THC lessened their fear of electric shocks, because it suppressed their memory of them.” Researchers in this country have been prevented from doing extensive cannabis research by the government’s ongoing Jihad.

It’s a real pain in the ...
Salim Muwakkil (salim4x@aol.com) has forged a reputation as one of the country's most insightful writers on issues of African-American culture and politics. Currently, Muwakkil is working on a documentary titled Chicago Gangs: An American Story and writing the text for a book of photographs documenting the tenure of Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor.

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