

Medical marijuana bill could help sick patients in Illinois

by **Town Travis** | **MEDILL NEWS SERVICE**

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Chicagoan Julie Falco was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1988. She suffered from numbness, tingling, vision problems and depression, along with other symptoms.

"I was taking pharmaceuticals for all those symptoms," Falco said. "I had severe side effects to the medication. I started to not understand what the MS was and what the side effects were."

After 2004, Falco started baking marijuana into brownies and eating three small squares every day, even though it wasn't legal.

"I started weaning myself off of all the medications," she

said. "I was able to get off all those toxic chemicals that were really effecting me. I have a better quality of life from this." Falco's doctor supported her decision to use marijuana as a treatment.

Now legislation to legalize medical marijuana is in both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly. If the bills -- both known as the Alternative Treatment for Serious Diseases Causing Chronic Pain and Debilitating Conditions Act -- pass, then seriously ill patients like Falco would be able to legally use medical marijuana with a doctor's recommendation.

"The problem is not doctors recognizing the value of this medicine," said Dan Bernath, assistant director of communications for the Marijuana Policy Project in Washington, D.C. "The problem is patients taking that advice and suffering legal action."

If Illinois legalizes medical marijuana, patients won't have to fear local prosecution. Federal officers could still make arrests under U.S. law, but the Drug Enforcement Administration has indicated it will not do so, according to Bernath.

The senate bill (SB2865), co-sponsored by Sens. John Cullerton and Donn Trotter (both D-Chicago), was approved by the Public Health Committee and is expected to go to a vote on the senate floor soon. The house bill (HB5938), sponsored by Rep. Angelo Saviano (R-River Grove), remains in the House Rules Committee.

House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie (D-Chicago) said Tuesday she didn't think the bill would pass. "I think it's unfortunate, since I think it's pretty clear that there are particular illnesses for which marijuana is a good treatment," she said. "[For some people], medical marijuana is the solution to their problems."

Under federal law, doctors may recommend marijuana to patients, but they cannot prescribe it or assist patients in getting it. However, if patients follow their doctor's recommendation to use marijuana, they can face arrest and jail time in Illinois under current law.

If the legislation passes, Illinois would join 12 other states that have legalized medical marijuana.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy cites the risks of using marijuana, saying on its Web site, "Marijuana is a substance that intoxicates those who use it, injuring their health and the well-being of those around them." ONDCP relates marijuana use to schizophrenia, depression, cognitive deficits and respiratory problems and considers it to be a "gateway" drug for cocaine and heroin.

Critics of medical marijuana argue that smoking it is harmful to the respiratory system, but a 2007 study by the University of California in San Francisco said using a vaporizing device instead of smoking could offset this danger.

"With the advent of vaporizers that allow patients to heat their marijuana to the point where it releases its psychoactive components as vapor, patients can receive the same therapeutic benefits from medical marijuana without the risks of inhaling smoke," Bernath said.

"Medical marijuana is proven to be a much safer option than many other painkillers, including narcotics like OxyContin," Bernath said.

A recent position paper from the American College of Physicians -- the second largest physicians organization in the United States -- calls on the federal government to allow medical marijuana research and to protect patients and doctors who use it.

Dr. David Ostrow, a retired addiction and psychiatry clinician, said he hopes the paper will aid passage of Illinois' proposed legislation.

"[Marijuana] has been in use and demonstrated to be safe and effective for hundreds, if not thousands, of years," he said. "It's only been since the 1940s in the U.S. that it's been illegal."

Ostrow said that under the proposed Illinois bill, "it will still be classified as a dangerous drug, but one with medical use."

MS patient Falco said officials should take to heart the words of President George Bush's 2007 State of the Union address: "We must remember that the best health care decisions are made not by the government... but by patients and their doctors."