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Guest Viewpoint

GUEST VIEWPOINT: Marijuana should be allowed as PTSD therapy

By Alan Cohn and Brian Michaels

Published: *Midnight*, Oct. 4

In Oregon we are at a political crossroads concerning the politics of medical marijuana and the politics of supporting the nation's troops.

Many veterans returning from two wars suffer from severe physical disabilities and post-traumatic stress syndrome. PTSD sufferers are growing in number, and little treatment is available. A large percentage of those sufferers report a marked improvement in their overall quality of life and family relationships with the use of medical marijuana.

So we, as a state, are being pressed to choose between a distrust of marijuana and the support of our troops.

Whatever one's political opinion about these wars, we as a nation extend our appreciation and support to our veterans. The problem is that the American government, through the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and the National Institute on Drug Abuse, does not permit testing of marijuana for medical purposes — testing that might reveal symptomatic benefit from marijuana for medical purposes.

The federal agencies do allow and pay for testing that might reveal adverse consequences from the use of marijuana — but not for benefits. And the only supply of marijuana approved for testing is of low-quality material from a single source, not the strains that have been developed that appear to have greater medicinal potential.

For example, in April 2011, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recognized research from the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies to evaluate whether smoked or vaporized marijuana might help reduce PTSD symptoms in 50 veterans diagnosed with PTSD but for whom conventional therapy has been unsuccessful. Six months later, the National Institute on Drug Abuse declined to accept the research.

When the science is so contaminated with politics, we need look elsewhere to address this problem. MAPS has also filed a lawsuit to allow marijuana to be obtained from a source other than the federal farms in Mississippi that produce a single strain of low-quality material.

Why not simply trust our troops when they report some improvement to their lives? PTSD is a recognized disorder, with specific identifiable symptoms to support diagnosis. These symptoms can include night terrors, panic attacks and certain anti-social behaviors. Opiate pain pills are not serving our troops, yet the DEA prefers this medication for our troops.

Israel, as you can imagine, is a nation with a large number of troops diagnosed with PTSD. The Israeli government, however, does not place politics above its veterans. Israel has conducted studies on cannabis and its benefits to those suffering from PTSD.

According to a presentation at the Cannabinoid Conference in Bonn, Germany, last month, “Israeli researchers are convinced that post-traumatic stress disorder patients using medical cannabis had significant improvement in high quality of existence ... with a few positive alterations in harshness of post traumatic stress disorder.”

This is consistent with what one of our authors, Dr. Alan Cohn, has experienced as the psychiatrist overseeing the Lane County jail. In the 35 years he has provided services to Lane County Adult Corrections, he reports that many patients support the fact that medical marijuana helps people suffering from PTSD to remain in the community, often leading productive and high-functioning lives. However, when the source of people’s medicine is removed or they are legally prohibited from using it, increased PTSD symptoms result in behavioral and emotional instability, which frequently results in a return to jail. Families confirm this sad and unnecessary outcome. The results include a great expense to society, fragmented families having to go on public assistance, traumatized children and real criminals having to be released because of overcrowded jails.

From Cohn’s perspective, this is a cruel and unnecessary outcome for our veterans who have sacrificed for our country. A prohibitionist mentality leaves these men and women to suffer when intelligent regulation, education and taxation would provide a superior outcome.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, “Prohibition goes beyond the bounds of reason in that it attempts to control a man’s appetite by legislation and makes crimes of things that are not crimes.”

Alan Cohn, M.D., is the psychiatric physician for Lane County Adult Corrections. Brian Michaels is an attorney in Eugene.

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