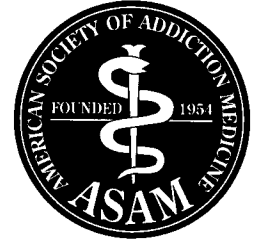


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Marijuana Ballot Initiatives Are About Harm Reduction, Not Legalization

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In the ASAM Newsletter of December 1998 [Addiction Medicine News, Vol. 13, No. 6, page 3], a comment was made concerning the marijuana ballot initiatives. This comment said that international financier George Soros was "long a proponent of legalizing drug use."

I am quite familiar with Mr. Soros' position. It is not legalization of drug use. The editorial received this information from opponents of the initiatives — drug "warmongers" who wish to paint everybody who has a negative view of our incarceration policies as legalizers. Mr. Soros is financially behind a number of initiatives to reduce the global harm from drugs. This policy is known as "harm reduction," not legalization.

The newsletter should be more familiar with Mr. Soros' work in the area of drug policy. The policy is intelligent, ethical and very common sense, unlike our drug war. Addiction medicine should be aware of his important contributions to our field.

Whatever one feels concerning the marijuana ballot initiatives, I do not believe that there is much credibility

within medicine for incarcerating people for marijuana use. That kind of abuse of human beings is what these initiatives are geared to curb. ■

Dr. McCarthy is Medical Director of the Bi-Valley Medical Clinic, Sacramento, CA, and a member of the California Society of Addiction Medicine's Committee on Opiate Dependence.

[See page 3 for an update on the marijuana ballot initiatives.]

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Medical Marijuana Controversy Continues

Seventeen AIDS organizations have urged that physicians be allowed to prescribe marijuana as an emergency measure to people with HIV/AIDS, without waiting for further research into the benefits of medical marijuana. A review by the Institute of Medicine, to be completed early in 1999, could result in the rescheduling of marijuana into a less restrictive category that would allow it to be prescribed. The review of the health effects and medical treatment benefits of marijuana was ordered by Gen. Barry McCaffrey, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

In an October 1997 letter to the U.S. Congress, Gen. McCaffrey wrote that "If sound medical research demonstrates that there are medical uses for smoked marijuana, there are appropriate and responsive procedures for rescheduling this mind-influencing drug through the time-tested process. The FDA has already demonstrated flexibility in accelerating procedures for allowing the use of emerging AIDS-related drugs without jeopardizing science or the public health."

Meanwhile, the aftermath of ballot initiatives to legalize certain uses of marijuana finds some jurisdictions having problems in implementing the controversial measures. In November 1998, voters in Oregon, Alaska, Nevada, Washington State, and Colorado joined California and Arizona in approving referenda that eliminate penalties for so-called "medical" use of the otherwise banned drugs. However, California patients continue to be arrested for having marijuana plants in their possession or buying the drug from street dealers, the Associated Press reported February 14. "The main problem we've had is lack of guidance to law enforcement," said Jason Browne, a trustee of the Humboldt Cannabis Center in Arcata, CA. "Everyone is waiting for someone else to do something and, meanwhile, the patients are at risk."

In Oregon, state officials are attempting to develop guidelines to assist police in complying with the law when making marijuana arrests. As a result of the

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November referendum, police need to determine if a person possessing marijuana is using it illegally or for a medical purpose. The law requires medical marijuana users to apply for a special permit through the State Health Division, but the permit system will not be in place until May 1999. The new law prohibits officers from destroying or neglecting marijuana plants that they've seized from someone who is using the drug for medical purposes. However, by returning the marijuana plants to their owners, police are violating federal laws, which prohibit people from using marijuana for medical purposes.

District of Columbia voters still do not have official results of a ballot initiative there, as local officials are barred by Congressional edict from spending money to tally votes on the referendum. The District government has joined the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in a suit against the District's Election Board to force a count, while the federal Department of Justice is defending the Congressional ban.

The impasse is scheduled to end September 30 — the end of the federal fiscal year — when the District will be able to use FY 2000 funds to complete the ballot count, unless Congress decides to extend the ban. Polls conducted on election day indicate that the initiative was approved by a large majority.

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