

MYTH 5

Marijuana is used to treat cancer and other diseases.

Under the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, marijuana was established as a Schedule I controlled substance. In other words, it is a dangerous drug that has no recognized medical value.

Whether marijuana can provide relief for people with certain medical conditions, including cancer, is a subject of intense national debate. It is true that THC, the primary active chemical in marijuana, can be useful for treating some medical problems. Synthetic THC is the main ingredient in Marinol®, an FDA-approved medication used to control nausea in cancer chemotherapy patients and to stimulate appetite in people with AIDS. Marinol, a legal and safe version of medical marijuana, has been available by prescription since 1985.

However, marijuana as a smoked product has never proven to be medically beneficial and, in fact, is much more likely to harm one's health; marijuana smoke is a crude THC delivery system that also sends many harmful substances into the body. In 1999, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published a review of the available scientific evidence in an effort to assess the potential health benefits of marijuana and its constituent cannabinoids. The review concluded that smoking marijuana is not recommended for any long-term medical use, and a subsequent IOM report declared, "marijuana is not a modern medicine."⁴²

Clinical trials of smoked marijuana for therapy are underway through the National Institutes of Health, a major provider of funding for research on the potential medical uses of marijuana. Meanwhile, the best available evidence points to the conclusion that the adverse effects of marijuana smoke on the respiratory system would almost certainly offset any possible benefit.

Some states have removed criminal penalties for possessing marijuana for “medical” use, adding fuel to the debate about using smoked marijuana to reduce suffering. Residents in those states have voted to change the marijuana policy in the mistaken belief that the

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benefits of smoked marijuana exceed those provided by THC alone. A number of organizations are pushing to make marijuana available for medicinal purposes,⁴³ but this campaign is regarded by many public-health

experts as a veiled effort to legalize the drug.

Moreover, medicines are not approved in this country by popular vote. Before any drugs can be released for public use they must undergo rigorous clinical trials to demonstrate they are both safe and effective, and then be approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Our investment and confidence in medical science will be seriously undermined if we do not defend the proven process by which medicines are brought to market.