

Cancer victim seeks law permitting legal pot usage

By Val Swinton

Alva Emry has never smoked a cigarette in her life. Her husband says that during their 30 years of marriage he has never seen her touch a cigarette. But now Emry wants to start smoking. Not tobacco, but marijuana.

The Allen, Neb. resident has cancer of the liver, intestines and lungs and she hopes marijuana will save her life.

Emry says she does not want to smoke marijuana to combat her disease, but to combat the treatment for her disease. After each chemotherapy treatment, she suffers prolonged spells of nausea and vomiting. Once, during one of the spells, which lasted about 18 hours, her vomiting was so violent she burst blood vessels in her eyes.

The Nebraska chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws is hoping that Emry's case will help legalize marijuana for medical purposes in the state.

NORML claims that researchers have learned marijuana prevents nausea in cancer victims receiving chemotherapy treatments.

Not enough people

Some Nebraska legislators have said there may not be enough victims in the state to warrant legalizing marijuana for medical purposes. But with Emery, NORML believes it has a cancer victim who needs it, and its coordinator, Donald Fiedler, hopes that by publicizing the problems she faces, other cancer victims will come forward.

According to Fiedler, however, there isn't much time. He said he still hopes to get a bill introduced in the legislature through committee this session and this is the last week committees meet.

Emry needs marijuana to make her able to withstand the chemotherapy treatments, she said in an Omaha press conference Monday.

Chemotherapy breaks down the cells in her blood, and before she can receive her next treatment, she must build those cells back up. To do that, she must eat a lot of food, but because of her nausea attacks, she doesn't feel like eating anything, she said.

She is supposed to receive the treatments every three weeks, but often she is still too weak, and must wait as long as five weeks before receiving her next treatment. Every delay, she said, gives the cancer a chance to gain on her.

Lukewarm response

She has written to several state legislators urging passage of a bill in Nebraska, but, she said, the response was only lukewarm.

"The legislators said it would be difficult to go through the Food and Drug Administration, but that was about the only response I got."

The F.D.A. would have to approve Emry's use of marijuana if she were to receive the drug through the federal government. This is the normal channel through which cancer victims receive marijuana in states where its use is legal.

However, Fiedler was optimistic there was support in the legislature, especially on the Miscellaneous Subjects committee, to sponsor a bill. Such a bill normally would go through the Public Health Committee, but the committee quit meeting last week, and Fiedler said its chairman, Sen. Sam Cullen, of Hemingford has refused to call it back into session.

"I'll do anything"

So far, Emry has not resorted to buying marijuana from a street dealer. She said she would rather use it legally, under the direction of a doctor. But her husband left

little doubt that if the Legislature doesn't act, he will.

"She must build her blood back up. If you can't eat, you can't have chemotherapy treatments. If you can't have chemotherapy you'll die, and I'll do anything to get it (marijuana) for her."

Mr. Emry was asked if that meant he would try to obtain it illegally.

"If you stood by a hospital bed and saw a loved one vomiting time and time again, what would you do if you thought mari-

juana would help?"

Fiedler hinted that NORML may go to court to legalize the drug for medical purposes, but he admitted a long, drawn-out court battle would not help Emry.

The Emrys live 20 miles from Sioux City, Iowa, and the Iowa legislature is also considering a bill to legalize marijuana for medical use. But because they are not residents of Iowa, Mrs. Emry could not cross state lines to get marijuana legally.

Cullen said yesterday he refused to re-

convene his committee because the Legislature is 45 days into the 90-day session.

"I don't like to introduce a bill that isn't absolutely necessary," he said. "There's no emergency, there's no compelling reason to introduce this bill 45 days into the session."

Cullen said that because of the late date, he doubted that such a bill would be debated by the Legislature this year.

Dave Newell, the chairman of the Miscellaneous Subjects Committee, was not available for comment yesterday afternoon.

Victims eye therapeutic marijuana smoking

By Val Swinton

Robert Randall's story could make many UNL students turn green with envy. Not only is the marijuana he smokes generally twice as potent as that purchased on the street, but he doesn't buy his marijuana. The federal government does. He smokes 70 joints a week and doesn't spend a cent for it.

But Randall hasn't discovered the goose that laid the golden egg. He spent many months in court to win the right to smoke marijuana, because if he doesn't smoke it, he'll go blind.

He has glaucoma and says marijuana is more efficient than more conventional medication in treating the disease.

Randall, 31, a college speech professor from Washington D.C., was in Lincoln Sunday night for a press conference as part of a promotional effort to legalize marijuana in Nebraska for medical use.

Randall was first diagnosed as having glaucoma in 1972. He said the disease is not painful, but one of the symptoms is the victim's tendency to see tri-colored halo rings around lights. It was by looking at those tri-colored halo rings that Randall said he discovered the therapeutic value of marijuana.

Rings gone

He said as a social smoker he smoked two joints one night and the rings vanished. At first, Randall said, he was afraid to tell his doctor of his discovery.

"I quietly self-medicated for about a year," he said. "The symptoms reversed themselves and my area of vision expanded."

Randall said it got to the point where he was smoking about five joints a day, which became expensive, and he decided to grow his own. He grew four plants on the sun-deck of his Washington D.C. home, where they grew to about five feet.

Police discovered the plants when he was on vacation. When he returned home he was arrested.

"If they can use a weed as an excuse to arrest me, a very pretty weed, then they can use any excuse they want to arrest me," he said. "That's not my view of

freedom."

Following a lengthy court battle, a federal judge ruled that Randall had a right to smoke marijuana because of "medical necessity."

Not the first

Randall said what amazes him is the fact that he was not the first person to discover the benefits of marijuana for use by cancer and glaucoma victims. He said the government had evidence as early as 1970 that in some cases the drug was beneficial.

Randall blamed the bureaucratic system for not publicizing the benefits of marijuana.

Because government agencies are designed to discourage the use of marijuana, "the government decided it was not in their best interest to recognize reality, but to recognize the law."

Randall is the only glaucoma patient who is able to obtain marijuana legally for medical use, even though six states have legalized the drug for medical reasons.

Some chemotherapy patients, however, are now receiving marijuana legally.

Randall cited several cases of persons who went blind or died of cancer because the drug was not made available in states where it is legal. He said it is the state's responsibility to ensure that persons who need the drug for medical reasons will get it.


Despite the fact that he smokes 10 joints a day, and the potency is about twice that of street marijuana, Randall said he does not get high. He said his body has built an immunity to the dosage, and he takes it as medicine.

He said because the government does not know how to process marijuana, it tastes awful.

Randall said he does not expect marijuana to cure his condition.


"If I quit smoking marijuana, I could quickly go blind," he said. "I've gotten at least four years of sight I might not have had. If it's not a cure, it's the next best thing."

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