

A Connecticut paraplegic tells his story

'Marijuana has worked the best in easing pain'

By MARK MATHEW BRAUNSTEIN

As high commander in the war on drugs, Gen. Barry McCaffrey truly inspires me. He recently claimed that "not a shred of evidence" exists for marijuana's use as a medicine. As a potential civilian casualty of his war, I'm inspired to offer a shred.

Marijuana treats disorders of three kinds: glaucoma of the eyes, appetite loss and nausea of the stomach, and pain and spasms of muscles. I speak from experience.

Muscles paralyzed by multiple sclerosis (MS) or spinal cord injury (SCI) experience involuntary spasms and intractable pains. Spasms from very nervous nervous systems can dump occupants out of their wheelchairs. And pains from the spinal cord's shorted circuits can strike like lightning bolts.

Paralysis from MS or SCI remains incurable, but pharmacology offers many panaceas for symptoms and complications. Thus many paraplegics do five distinct drugs daily; some quadriplegics do 10 types. Christopher Reeve pops 12 different pills. No telling how many of each. All legal. Some lethal.

For spasms, there are tranquilizers such as baclofen, Dantrium and Valium. Some side effects: liver failure, insomnia and addiction. For chronic pain, there are narcotics such as codeine, morphine and Demerol. Some side effects: constipation, sedation and addiction. Paras and quads

would be walking zombies if they could walk.

As a paraplegic from SCI, I sought alternatives. I learned of one alternative first from the "crip" grapevine, then from testimonies of doctors and patients that were shelved 10 years ago by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and finally from animal experimentation, the animal being me. I learned that marijuana relaxes SCI spasms more effectively than do tranquilizers and relieves SCI pains more safely than do narcotics.

Some side effects: euphoria and paranoia. Paranoia about surveillance, search, arrest, prosecution, court costs, attorney fees, criminal fines, property forfeiture, prison terms and lifelong loss of civil rights.

I've sat on my duff long enough. I hereby stand up for my medical rights.

Marijuana's safety has been tested by millions of people in hundreds of countries for thousands of years. Until a paltry 60 years ago, its legality stood uncontested for five millennia of human history. It's flourished long before humans evolved and will endure long after the DEA and the USA disappear off the face of the Earth.

Two months ago, voter referendums in California and Arizona approved marijuana for medical use. During the past 20 years, 35 state legislatures (including mine, Connecticut) have proclaimed their advocacy for medical marijuana. Yet McCaffrey insists it's all smoke and mirrors. How can he know,



Illustration by DAVID SCHULZ

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unless he stands in my shoes? How can he know, unless he sits in my wheelchair? No wonder one doctor diagnoses marijuana as a cause of hysteria and illogical behavior in people who oppose its use.

Before 1990, the year of my spinal cord injury, for 17 years I neither consulted a physician nor consumed any pharmaceutical drugs. Not even aspirin. Since 1990, except for two weeks in 1994, I've again abstained from pharmaceutical drugs. I've adhered for 25 years to a whole foods vegetarian diet: no meat, fish, milk, egg, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, white cocaine, white heroin, white flour, white sugar, white salt — heck, I avoid even white tofu. My single sinful transgression is an herb that's very ancient, very natural, very available and very controversial.

My naturopathic physician approves and my allopathic physician accepts my use of marijuana to alleviate the pains and spasms of paraplegia. The federal program for medical access was suspended in 1992. Too many applicants. My M.D. consents to serve as my sponsor if the program is reinstated.

Discontent just to wait around in my wheelchair, I traveled last summer to Holland, where medically prescribed marijuana is fully legal. So I now possess a Dutch M.D.'s

prescription for one-half gram daily, which after sifting fills the space of the filter of a cigarette. What a big tiff over such a little puff!

Only one-fourth of all paraplegics stay employed full time by five years post-injury. At nearly seven years post-injury, I'm still fully employed as a college librarian, a profession known to attract dangerous criminals. And talk about danger — I continue to write and lecture, and not just about marijuana and paraplegia. Other paraplegics drop from the work force, half because of their disabilities and half because of their debilitating drugs. I remain productive despite marijuana, and maybe even because of it.

I accept full responsibility for my spinal cord injury from a diving accident. Society owes me nothing. Social Security owes me nothing. I receive no public assistance. No one needs to care for me; I live independently. I prepare all my own meals, and grow some of my own food. I await the day I can grow my own herb. It's the American way!

Now that I've confessed my crimes, will I find myself the target of a predawn police raid? "Come out with your hands up!" they'll shout through their bullhorns. "Either I can come out or I can put my hands up, but I can't do both," will be my answer. And I wonder, is the state prison wheelchair-accessible?