

My Two Sense

Commentary
By Lori Hicks

Healing Herb or Illicit Drug?

The question may speak to the difficulty in obtaining sites for medical marijuana dispensaries



LIKE EVERYTHING POLITICAL these days, depending on which Arizona voter you ask, there's a difference of opinion on marijuana. There are those who believe that it's a dangerous drug that should remain illegal. Others think the green leaf is a healing herb that yields considerable medical benefits, and should be made available to those who need it.

Back in November, by a slim majority, Arizona voters approved a measure that legalized medical marijuana use for people with chronic or debilitating diseases, including HIV/AIDS, cancer and other conditions. In April, the Arizona Department of Health Services began to accept applications for qualified patients and caregivers.

Unfortunately, just as the rules rolled out, the program has sparked controversy about the location of dispensaries. Officials made no consideration for the critically ill patients who may benefit from the use of medical marijuana, making the convenience of getting it nothing more than a pipe dream.

The rules imposed by cities dictate the distance the dispensaries have to be separated from schools, churches, community centers, homes and parks. As a real estate agent working with investors in the search for such facilities, I find it ironic that a day-care can be sandwiched between a strip club and a bar, with a paraphernalia shop behind, an adult toy store adjacent and a pawn shop across the street. Yet a medicinal cannabis shop can't be within a quarter mile of many of a city's forbidden zones.

Who knew so many churches were located in the industrial areas of town, next to the railroad tracks, tire yards and abandoned warehouses, robbing the medical marijuana community of prime locations. I can remember a time when it was almost as difficult to put a gay bar in the middle of the city.

Many of us in the gay community have had the unfortunate experience of watching a friend's body deteriorate as they enter the

end-stages of AIDS, suffering from a condition known as cachexia, or wasting syndrome. It's a condition approved for medical marijuana under the new law because of the proven benefits.

Are these the kind of people we want treated like drug addicts? I don't think so, but the rules and city ordinances put in place seem to suggest differently.

Many dispensary hopefuls are struggling to find a property to serve the qualified medical marijuana patients of the Valley. If not the city rules, then the stigma associated with marijuana is making landlords reluctant to rent to cannabis retailers.

There are pharmacies on almost every corner filled with a variety of dangerous drugs. Some drugs that are sold, when mixed with household items, become illicit street drugs, yet they can be obtained next door to churches, schools and parks.

If marijuana is a healing herb, why can't it be obtained in vitamin shops? If it is a medicine, why isn't it in pharmacies?

Why is it so hard for Arizona to get it right when implementing the law for medicinal marijuana?

Marijuana has been much maligned for its recreational use, while many people with severe illnesses remain a neglected in the controversy. Buried underneath the misrepresentations surrounding the character of medical marijuana patients and misunderstandings about marijuana's health benefits are the facts.

Marijuana as medicine can be used to:

- Stimulate appetite.
- Alleviate nausea and vomiting.

- Limit the muscle pain and spasticity caused by Multiple Sclerosis, as well as relieving tremor and unsteadiness of gait.

- Reduce intraocular pressure, which relieves the pain of glaucoma, and can sometimes slow or stop the progression of the condition.

If marijuana were an FDA-approved drug with recognized benefits for specific medical conditions, it could be prescribed like any other drug. Perhaps then the rule makers of Arizona, who put these tremendous restrictions on accessing medical cannabis legally, would reconsider the ridiculousness of their fear of allowing marijuana in the community.

It is unfortunate how the rules will affect patients' ability to get the cards and their medicine. The success of the medical marijuana program in Arizona hinges on correcting public perception and strengthening the belief that the medicinal powers of marijuana should not be understated or misunderstood.

Until then, rather than travel long distances to negotiate potentially dangerous neighborhoods, those needing medical marijuana should find a dispensary that delivers. Besides that, they could fall back on a loophole in the rules, which provides for a qualified patient to grow their own medicine for the first year.

So, plant your seeds ... after receiving approval from the state, of course. **-E**

Lori Hicks is a freelance writer, activist and businesswoman. She can be reached at Lori@LoriHicks.com.