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Iowa Poll: Iowans give thumbs up to medicinal marijuana

By TONY LEYS • tleys@dmreg.com • © 2010, Des Moines Register and Tribune Co. • February 16, 2010

Nearly two-thirds of Iowans think patients should be allowed to use marijuana as medicine if their doctors approve, a new Iowa Poll shows.

However, fewer than a third of Iowans want to make the drug legal for people who just want to get high, the poll shows.

Fourteen states have decided to allow medical uses of marijuana. The Iowa Board of Pharmacy plans to decide on Wednesday whether to recommend that the Iowa Legislature follow suit.

Supporters of the idea say marijuana can relieve pain and nausea for many patients suffering from debilitating diseases, including cancer, AIDS and multiple sclerosis.

But skeptics say prescription drugs already are available for those purposes, and legalizing marijuana for medical purposes could make it easier to obtain the drug for recreational use, they say.

Sixty-four percent of Iowans support allowing medical uses of marijuana, the Iowa Poll found. Thirty-three percent oppose the idea. Three percent are not sure.

Only 28 percent of Iowans favor legalizing marijuana for recreational use, and 70 percent oppose the idea.

Poll participant Kevin Sikkink, 44, of Decorah agrees with the majorities on both questions.

Sikkink, who teaches part time at a community college and works in electronics, said he believes some ill people could see legitimate benefits from marijuana.

"If it's under a doctor's prescription, what's the difference between that and penicillin?" he asked.

Sikkink noted that pharmacies already sell addictive drugs, such as OxyContin, which he believes are at

least as dangerous as marijuana.

Sikkink thinks legislators have more important things to worry about, including the budget, but he would support an eventual move to legalize medical uses of marijuana in Iowa. He said he would not support legalizing recreational uses of marijuana, partly because he believes that could legitimize cocaine and other highly addictive drugs.

"I think it provides a nice gateway to the harder stuff," he said.

Todd Berner, 42, an engineer from Independence, opposes legalizing marijuana for any uses. He sees the medical-marijuana campaign as a cover for people who want to get high.

"You can see what's happened in California. It's become a pothead's dreamland," he said, referring to the hundreds of marijuana shops that have opened since that state decided to allow medical marijuana use.

Berner said that doctors already can prescribe legal prescription drugs to fight pain or nausea, and they don't need to add marijuana to the list. He doesn't see why, after taking aggressive action to stem cigarette use, the government would loosen regulations on marijuana.

Ann O'Brien, 75, of Dubuque said she definitely supports letting patients use marijuana to treat medical problems. She said she also has no major problem with letting Americans use it for recreational reasons.

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"You know, I don't smoke marijuana — never have," she said. "But I don't think people should go to jail for smoking it. I don't think it's worse than booze."

O'Brien is a nurse who works for a Catholic church. She said she believes some patients could be helped by smoking marijuana, especially for pain associated with diseases such as cancer.

"I just don't know where the harm is in it, especially for someone who is terminal," she said.

O'Brien's views, especially on the recreational-use question, are unusual among poll participants her age. Only 11 percent of Iowans age 65 and older think marijuana should be legalized for recreation. Support is stronger among younger poll participants. Forty percent of adults younger than 35 say they support general legalization of the drug.

There is less of a generational split on the medical-marijuana question, the poll shows. Among seniors, 52 percent favor legalizing the drug for such purposes. Support is 67 percent among adults younger than 35.

Iowans' politics appear to strongly influence their views on the questions.

Support for medical marijuana is 76 percent among Democrats, 47 percent among Republicans, and 66 percent among political independents, the poll shows. Support for general legalization of marijuana is 36 percent among Democrats, 14 percent among Republicans and 31 percent among independents.

The debate is both philosophical and scientific. Both sides cite reams of reports on marijuana's effectiveness and dangers, or lack thereof. Proponents say the drug is safer and more affordable than many prescription medications. Opponents say that it is unnecessary, and that legalizing it for medical uses would open the door for more illicit uses.

Support for loosening marijuana laws is stronger nationally than in Iowa, another recent poll found. The ABC News/Washington Post poll, released last month, found that 81 percent of Americans support allowing marijuana use for medical reasons, and 46 percent favor legalizing small amounts of marijuana for personal use in general.

New Jersey last month became the 14th state to allow medical uses of marijuana. The others are Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington state. The states vary in how much marijuana users may possess, how they must document their medical need, and where they may obtain the drug.

Marijuana remains illegal under federal law, but President Barack Obama's administration has said it would not prosecute patients for using it if they follow rules states set for medical purposes. Federal law forbids physicians from formally prescribing the drug, but they may write notes saying they approve of a patient's use of it.

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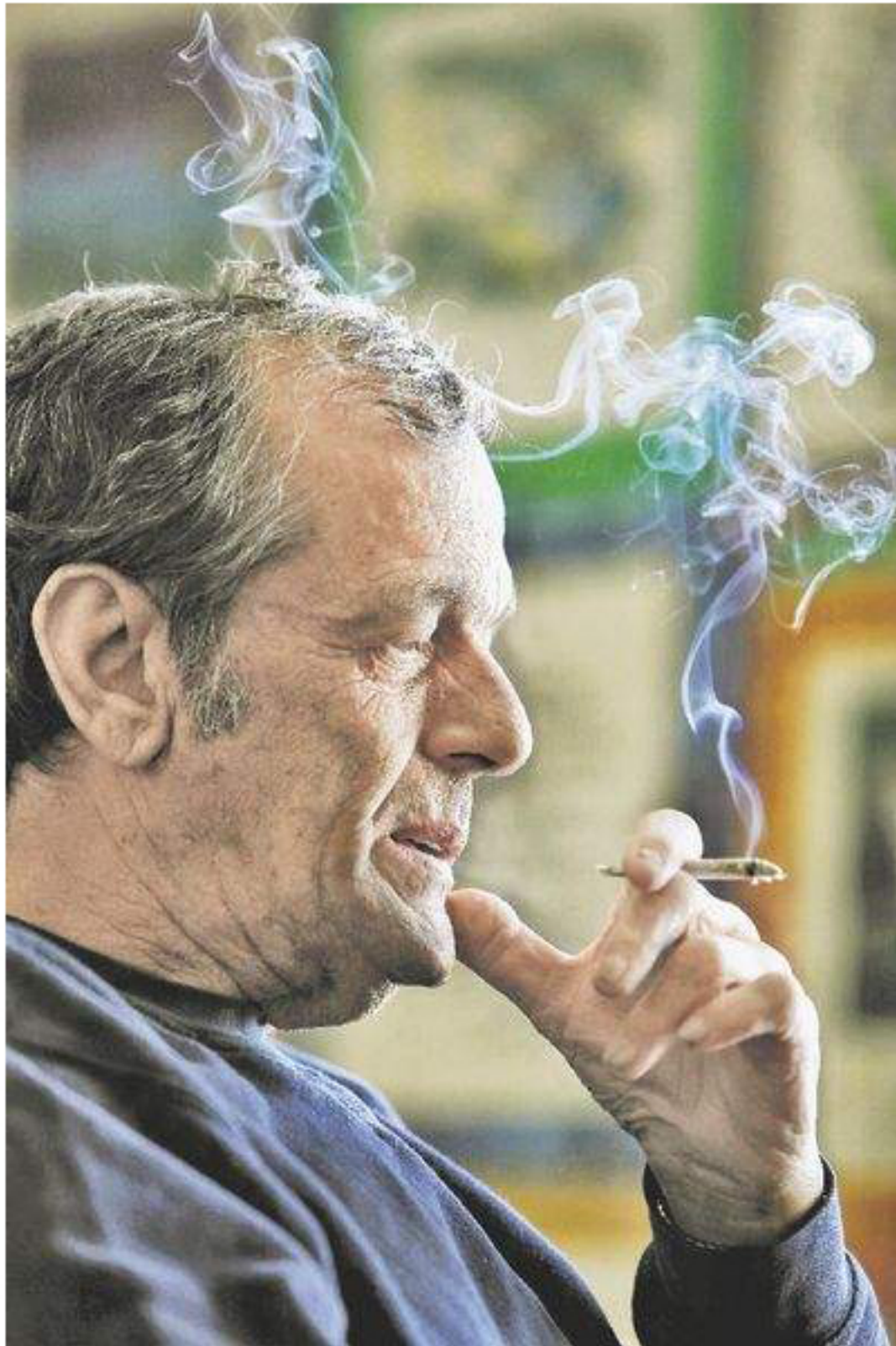
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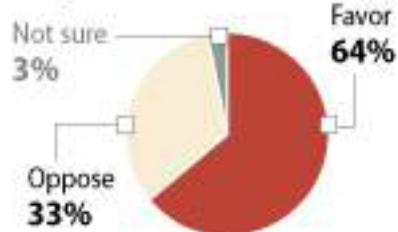
George McMahon, 59, of Livermore is one of two Iowans who can legally use marijuana for medical purposes under a federal program that stopped accepting new participants in 1992. He's urging Iowa authorities to legalize marijuana use for patients whose doctors approve.

RODNEY WHITE/THE REGISTER

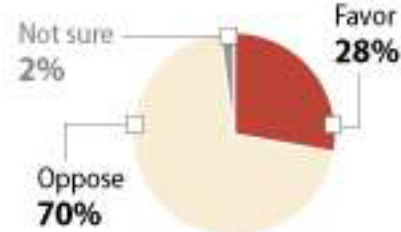
Yes for medicine, no for fun

The Iowa Poll found big differences in Iowans' views on legalizing marijuana use for medical purposes vs. for recreation.

Do you favor or oppose allowing medical marijuana in Iowa?



Do you favor or oppose legalizing marijuana for recreational use?



Age affects Iowans' views on recreational marijuana more than on medical marijuana:

Support for legalizing medical marijuana:



Support for legalizing recreational marijuana:



Source: Iowa Poll of 805 adults

The Register

•About the Iowa Poll

The Iowa Poll, conducted for The Des Moines Register by Selzer & Co. Inc. of Des Moines, was based on interviews with 805 Iowans ages 18 or older. Interviewers contacted households with randomly selected telephone numbers.

Percentages based on the full sample may have a maximum margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. Responses were weighted by age to reflect the general population based on recent census data. Results based on smaller samples of respondents, such as by gender or age, have larger margins of error. Republishing the copyright Iowa Poll without credit to The Des Moines Register is prohibited. The poll, conducted Jan. 31 to Feb. 3, asked the following: This month, the Iowa Pharmacy Board will hold a hearing on whether it should recommend the use of marijuana to treat medical conditions if a patient has a doctor's approval. Do you favor or oppose allowing medical marijuana in Iowa? What about legalizing marijuana for recreational use, with restrictions similar to the use of alcohol, such as prohibiting driving while under the influence and setting a minimum? Do you favor or oppose legalizing marijuana for recreational use?