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Pro-marijuana group seeks different standards for less-harmful drugs

By **KARA HANSEN**
 The Daily Astorian

A pro-cannabis group stopped on the North Coast Monday during a three-week tour promoting a somewhat controversial but now 25-year-old message.

All drugs should be weighed according to the same standards and evaluated on a level playing field, said Sandee Burbank, executive director and co-founder of Mothers Against Misuse and Abuse, or MAMA. That requires retooling the "illogical, draconian drug policy that threatens our families' health and well-being," and instead relying on "personal responsibility and informed decision-making," according to the group.

"Even though we're talking about cannabis here, what we're really doing is introducing people to the fact that it doesn't really matter what drug you're taking. A drug is a drug is a drug, and all drugs can have dangerous side effects," said Burbank. "What works for one person may not work for another person. It's about personal responsibility and informed decision making, always keeping in mind respect for human dignity and our differences."

The federal government does not recognize any legitimate use of marijuana, but about a dozen states, including Oregon, have decriminalized it for some medicinal purposes.

Of 17,000 people benefiting from Oregon's almost 10-year-old Medical Marijuana Program, the average age is 50, according to MAMA. The latest figures from the state program show 14,868 registered patients. That includes 146 people with medical marijuana cards in Clatsop County.

But the drug remains controversial, partly because of the financial sway held by the pharmaceutical industry, said Burbank. Marijuana has always been subject to widespread use, recreational or medical, legal or not, she said. "Since 1982, it was reported a third of the adult population regularly uses cannabis. That hasn't changed." She worries about those who support "prohibition."

"When we make drugs illegal, it's very hard to talk to people about the negative consequences or what can be done," she said. "I would like to see this go from a punishment modality to a medicine-based modality," with a "policy based on reason, where we provide the individual the tools they need to make good decisions regarding all risky behavior. ... We could evaluate all drugs using the same standards then figure out how we can regulate and control those drugs."

In that case, compared to tobacco, alcohol and some prescription drugs, marijuana's benefits might outweigh any social consequences, she said.

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However, problems persist for patients in the program, mostly involving public perception. Often, marijuana cardholders run into those problems at work.

A North Coast daycare provider who declined to disclose her name attended the Monday presentation. She said she hoped to apply for a county job and met all the requirements for skills and experience, " but I think my Oregon medical marijuana card status would probably toss me right back out."

She registered for medical marijuana after deciding it provided the most relief of migraine headaches and severe menstrual pain. To be eligible for Oregon's program, patients must suffer "debilitating medical conditions," such as cancer, glaucoma, or HIV, or other conditions causing severe pain or nausea, seizures or persistent muscle spasms.

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The daycare provider said she avoids smoke toxins by using a vaporizer. In addition, she said, "In a couple of hours, I'm going to be just who I was before," rather than experiencing grogginess sometimes caused by other medications.

"I'm hoping in the next few years we can get in place some sort of standardized impairment test," she said. Then, "I could prove I'm not impaired at work, just because you can test it in my blood or urine. I'd like to change the face of this any way that I could."

Burbank said impairment testing based on reaction time or other motor and mental indicators isn't likely to be implemented, but she would support it.

In One Ear



"Impairment testing needs to be about impairment and not what your body contains," she said. "A person who used cannabis ... can sleep during the night, wake up and be refreshed. They're not going to be impaired at all, but they're going to test positive." In addition, she said, prescription drugs cause impairment, and "we now know prescription drugs cause more deaths than alcohol."

But she acknowledged that cannabis is not free of problems.

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"You need to be educated about cannabis as well; it can interact with other medicines you're taking," she said. "But we've had the opportunity now to teach people who use cannabis medically. ... There are more and more people who don't smoke it."

Just two community members attended the presentation, which was held in a room reserved at the Cannery Cafe with four people representing the Mothers Against Misuse and Abuse tour.

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Founded in 1982, MAMA will conclude its anniversary circuit Oct. 20 in Portland at a conference with speakers on industrial hemp and "sustainable hemp options," current and retired doctors, a retired law enforcement officer, patients in Oregon's program and one in a handful authorized to use medical cannabis through the federal Compassionate Investigational New Drug program, which is now closed to new patients.

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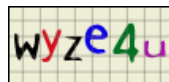
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