

MEDICAL MARIJUANA RESEARCH: SPRING 1997 OVERVIEW

Rick Doblin

AS THIS WINTER comes to an end, so too, it seems, does the political deep-freeze that has blocked medical marijuana research. As readers of the MAPS newsletter know only too well, Dr. Abrams, UC San Francisco and MAPS have been working for over four and a half years to obtain permission for a study to investigate the use of smoked marijuana in the promotion of appetite and weight gain in people suffering from the AIDS wasting syndrome. MAPS recently donated \$5,000 to UC San Francisco to support the expenses and staff time involved in the preparation of Dr. Abrams' second National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant application requesting funding and a supply of marijuana for the study. Dr. Abrams' application is due in May. NIH's decision will be announced in August.

NIH-sponsored meeting

In an attempt to demonstrate that the Clinton Administration is prioritizing science over ideology, a *Workshop on the Medical Utility of Marijuana* was held at the main NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland on February 19-20, 1997. Structured as a series of presentations to an expert panel by researchers familiar with various medical uses of marijuana, its purpose was to review the scientific research on marijuana. Statements made by the members of the expert panel to the media at the conclusion of the meeting suggest that the formal recommendations of the panel will include the call for additional research, especially

into the use of marijuana in the treatment of AIDS wasting syndrome. Thus, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic that Dr. Abrams' second NIH grant application will be approved.

Dr. Temple outlines study design

The most useful and forthright part of the conference was a talk by Dr. Robert Temple, Associate Director for Medical Policy, FDA. Dr. Temple outlined a series of guidelines regarding the design of research protocols for various potential medical uses of marijuana. Dr. Temple acknowledged the interaction between science and politics and suggested that although FDA regulations do not require a drug to be more effective or safer than other drugs in order for it to be approved for prescription use, that it would nevertheless be wise for medical marijuana advocates to seek to conduct studies with people suffering from serious diseases in whom the currently available medicines are not sufficient or have intolerable side effects. Dr. Abrams' research agenda and design match Dr. Temple's suggestions almost exactly.

NIH review still required

The conference was not entirely without its setbacks. The expert committee assigned to review the scientific data will probably not recommend that NIH itself conduct studies or create a special grant program. NIH will remain passive and only respond to requests from outside research teams. Most importantly, NIDA will

continue to refuse to provide marijuana to FDA-approved studies unless the protocols have been submitted to the NIH for review and have been approved, despite the delays involved in the NIH peer-review process and the small percentage of proposals that get funded.

MAPS funded the printing costs for a booklet containing statements from a coalition of medical marijuana policy reform groups that was given to the media and to conference participants. MAPS' post-conference report to the expert committee can be found on the MAPS web site at www.maps.org/mmj/.

Migraine study

In addition to supporting Dr. Abrams' protocol, MAPS has donated \$2,500 to Dr. Ethan Russo, U. of Montana, for expenses involved in preparing an NIH grant application for the study of the use of marijuana in the treatment of people whose migraines fail to respond to conventional medications. MAPS has an additional \$7,500 available to support the expenses of other research teams interested in applying to NIH for medical marijuana research. Dr. Abrams and Dr. Russo are the only physicians that we know of who are trying to obtain permission to conduct medical marijuana research. To apply for a grant, contact Sylvia Thyssen at MAPS. •