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Research Must Determine Medical Potential of Marijuana, NIH Expert Panel Conclud

By Robert Mathias, NIDA NOTES Staff Writer

A National Institutes of Health (NIH) panel of experts has concluded that critical questions about the the usefulness of marijuana remain largely unanswered by studies that have been conducted to date. The pan NIH to facilitate rigorous, well-designed clinical studies to evaluate marijuana's potential to treat a varie conditions. Such studies must address the many potential short- and long-term hazards of smoked mariju stressed.

The panel of eight experts, who have broad experience in clinical studies and therapeutics, expressed the 37-page report that NIH issued in August 1997. NIH had convened the experts at a 2-day meeting earlie consider wide-ranging claims about the therapeutic usefulness of marijuana, particularly smoked marijua for and feasibility of additional research. At the meeting, the panel reviewed the published scientific data use of marijuana and considered comments, including those from patients and advocacy groups.

Under U.S. law, marijuana has been classified in the most restrictive category of controlled substances s means that the drug in its usual form has a high potential for abuse and has no commonly accepted medi country. However, advocates for the medical use of smoked marijuana claim it is effective in such areas nausea associated with cancer chemotherapy, counteracting the wasting syndrome associated with AIDS glaucoma. An oral form of marijuana's principal active ingredient, delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), dronabinol, is approved as a treatment for nausea and vomiting related to cancer chemotherapy. Dronabi to stimulate the appetite of AIDS patients.

The NIH panel noted that the current debate over using marijuana as a medicine centers on claims that s offers therapeutic advantages over dronabinol and that it has potential to treat other conditions, such as g glaucoma. However, little data from clinical trials are available to support or refute these claims, the pan showed.

Any studies of marijuana's medical potential need to consider both the short- and long-term risks associated with smoked marijuana, the panel stressed.

Most previous studies of marijuana's therapeutic potential have used THC in capsule form. Such studies questions about the potential benefits or risks of smoked marijuana, which has substantially different do pharmacological activity from the oral dosage form, the panel noted. In addition, although THC is the pr psychoactive component of the cannabis leaf, other compounds in the leaf may have therapeutic propert said.

The panel called for more studies to properly evaluate marijuana's medical potential in five areas: analge relief; neurological and movement disorders; nausea and vomiting associated with cancer chemotherapy appetite stimulation to counteract weight loss in patients with AIDS or cancer. In addition to dronabinol treatments already are available for many of these indications, the panel noted. For example, a number o can treat pain without risking marijuana's adverse effects.

However, even where effective medications exist, marijuana could be studied for its potential to offer re who do not respond fully to such treatments, the panel stated. Other reasons for studying marijuana's me include determining whether it is useful in treating diseases or conditions for which treatments are not cu available, such as nerve pain caused by disease or tissue injury, and whether it could enhance the therap currently available treatments.

Any studies of marijuana's medical potential need to consider both the short- and long-term risks associa marijuana, the panel stressed. Among the short-term risks cited by the panel are cardiovascular effects, e lungs, and undesirable mental and behavioral effects. Other concerns would come into play if marijuana treat patients with chronic diseases, such as the possibility that frequent and prolonged marijuana use mi impair the functioning of the body's immune system. Examining that aspect is particularly important for already have compromised immune systems, such as cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and HIV the panel noted.

To address health concerns about using smoked marijuana for longer term therapy, the panel suggested t strive to develop alternative dosage forms for marijuana, such as a smoke-free inhaled delivery system. S could deliver purer forms of THC and related cannabinoids and permit better control of doses, the panel

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For More Information

The full text of the expert panel's report on the medical utility of marijuana is available at **http://www.nih.gov/news/medmarijuana/MedicalMarijuana.htm**

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