

National Review Senior Editor Richard Brookhiser's Congressional Testimony (1996)

Why I Support Medical Marijuana by Richard Brookhiser, Senior Editor, National Review

The following article was excerpted from testimony Mr. Brookhiser presented before the House Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Crime, on March 6, 1996 in support of the efficacy of medical marijuana.

I am a conservative Republican. I am a senior editor of National Review, Ronald Reagan's favorite magazine. I've written for it for 26 years. I support the use of medical marijuana because of my politics, but I'm also for it because I've had to use it.

In 1992 I got testicular cancer. The treatment was straightforward -- an operation, followed by a rather harsh form of chemotherapy. Any chemotherapy is harsh because all chemotherapy is poison. You're dumping poison into your bloodstream, killing millions of cells, in order to kill the thousands of malignant cells which will not recover. Because it is poison, the body wants to get rid of it. That's why chemotherapy causes nausea. To deal with this, I took the latest anti-nausea drugs and I also did self-hypnosis and mental imaging. These all worked -- up to a point. But beyond that point, I needed extra help and so I smoked marijuana.

I had smoked marijuana maybe ten times in college during the seventies. I even inhaled. I stopped because I found that I didn't like smoke, or being high, or the conversation of pot-heads. I turned to it again when I got cancer because marijuana gives healthy people an appetite and prevents people who are nauseated from throwing up. None of my doctors or nurses at New York University Medical Center or Memorial Sloan-Kettering discouraged me from doing this. They had all had patients who had used marijuana to fight nausea and who had reported good results. I had good results too. Because of the marijuana, my last two courses of chemotherapy were almost nausea-free.

There was only one problem; I had to become a criminal to do this. Cancer patients are not the only people in this bind. AIDS patients who have the wasting syndrome report that marijuana gives them an appetite again. Glaucoma patients find that it arrests the deterioration of their eyes. People with chronic migraines, epilepsy, and multiple sclerosis use it to relieve their symptoms. A good summary of all of these experiences can be found in *Marihuana, The Forbidden Medicine*, by Lester Grinspoon, M.D. and James B. Bakalar. Dr. Grinspoon is a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the book is published by Yale University Press, so this is not something downloaded from the Internet. But any sick person who wants to use marijuana to help himself has to break the law. I'm a member of the media elite who lives in Manhattan so I wasn't at high risk. But plenty of sick people get arrested and plenty of them go to jail.

There are three common arguments against the medical use of marijuana, all of them faulty.

1. The first is that THC, the main active ingredient in the drug, is available in a legally prescribable pill form. But the pill has problems. It's expensive. Because it's a pill, and therefore slower acting, people have trouble adjusting the dosage; they often find

themselves taking too much. In my case, I thought treating nausea with a pill was not a bright idea.

2. The second argument is that smoked marijuana has never been tested scientifically. This is not entirely true. One test was done at UCLA in 1970 for the Los Angeles Police Department to prove that pot-smoking dilated the pupils. However, the researchers found that it actually contracted the pupils. They also discovered that marijuana relieved pressure within the eyeball. This is why marijuana is useful in treating glaucoma.

But it is true that it is difficult to test marijuana. That is because the government makes it so. The case of Dr. Donald Abrams at San Francisco General Hospital is instructive. Dr. Abrams is an AIDS researcher who wants to test the efficacy of smoked marijuana in treating the wasting syndrome. For more than two years, he tried to get marijuana legally from the National Institute on Drug Abuse for his experiments -- to no avail. So doctors cannot prescribe marijuana because it hasn't been tested, but doctors aren't allowed to do any tests. This is a classic "Catch-22."

3. The third objection is that by legalizing marijuana, we will be setting a bad example to a society engaged in a war on drugs. In fact, we will be setting no example at all. The availability of morphine in hospitals is not the reason people smoke crack. A hairless cancer patient with an IV tube in his arm is not a come-on for a pusher. The connection between the issue of medical marijuana and the war on drugs runs the other way. The reason we don't allow medical use is because of the spill-over of an extreme wartime psychology.

National Review has taken a stand on the war on drugs, but it is not relevant here. If you think the war is wrong, then the ban on medical marijuana is simply one symptom among many of its excess and folly. If you think the war is right, then the ban is an irrelevant and overzealous offshoot, like fighting the Kaiser in World War I by changing the German names of Midwestern streets.

I want to end by addressing my fellow Republicans. My support for medical marijuana is not a contradiction of my principles, but an extension of them. I am for law and order. But crime has to be fought intelligently and the law disgraces itself when it harasses the sick. I am for traditional virtues, but if carrying your beliefs to unjust ends is not moral, it is philistine. Most importantly, I believe in getting government off people's backs. We should include the backs of sick people trying to help themselves.

My cancer is gone now, I was lucky. God forbid that anyone in this room should ever need chemotherapy, but statistics tell us that many of us will. Let me assure you that whatever you think now, or however you vote, if that moment comes to you, you will turn to marijuana. Extend that liberty to your fellow citizens.

Richard Brookhiser is a former user of medicinal marijuana and a senior editor of National Review.