

Group fighting for medicinal use of marijuana

Supporters say the plant should be treated like other drugs that are legal when prescribed by a doctor.

By LOREN KELLER
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

George McMahon sat down on the steps of the Capitol building in Des Moines Saturday, leaned back, fired up a marijuana cigarette and casually inhaled — and he wasn't breaking any laws.

McMahon, who suffers from a rare genetic defect that causes muscle spasms and nausea, is one of eight people in the United States authorized by the federal government to use the drug legally.

"My hospital bills used to be thousands of dollars. Now I smoke a plant," McMahon, of Bode, told more than 30 people gathered Saturday for a rally in support of legalizing the drug for medical purposes. "I smoke marijuana because it makes me better. The other pills I took made me worse."

Most who attended the rally, in-

cluding McMahon, agreed that both corporate and government interests have prevented the drug's widespread legal use.

"They're fighting dirty, like in the 1930s when they said marijuana will make you mean," McMahon said. "They're using weapons against you that you don't understand."

Barbara Douglass of Storm Lake, another person who may use marijuana legally, also attended the rally. Douglass suffers from multiple sclerosis.

Carl Olsen of the group Iowans for Medical Marijuana, which sponsored

the rally, said he remains optimistic about favorable legislation becoming law.

"The legislators aren't afraid they won't get elected for supporting this issue," he said. "The public supports this issue."

Iowa Sen. Merlin Bartz, R-Grafton, who did not attend the rally but has agreed to draft legislation supporting the legal medical use of marijuana, said judgments about the drug's proper use should be left to the medical community.

"There are all other types of prescription drugs that are considered illegal if not used under the direction

of a doctor," Bartz said, "and for some reason (marijuana) has been singled out as something that cannot be legally prescribed by a doctor."

"In no way is that an endorsement of legalizing the drug," he added. Not all Iowa lawmakers agree.

Rep. Philip Wise, D-Keokuk, who teaches high school, did not attend the rally Saturday but said he would oppose such legislation.

"Having dealt with teens for the last 26 years, the last thing we need to do at this juncture is send the message that the use of any drugs, including softer drugs, is acceptable," he said.