

Humane legislation

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Two new bills relating to medical marijuana are being taken up in Annapolis. One would upgrade the state's current medical marijuana law, and the other would change marijuana from a Schedule I to a Schedule II controlled substance.

Sen. David Brinkley, a Republican representing [Frederick](#) and Carroll counties, and Delegate Dan Morhaim, M.D., a Baltimore County Democrat, are sponsoring the new medical marijuana bill; Morhaim and Sen. Bobby A. Zirkin, D-Baltimore County, are sponsoring the bill to change the classification of marijuana.

The new medical marijuana bill would do many things that the current law fails to address. It would set up a legal, defined distribution system that would help ensure patients a safe and effective means of acquiring the drug. According to Brinkley, this would involve distribution channels overseen by the state, and pharmacies or similarly sanctioned outlets to disseminate the marijuana.

That would be a huge improvement over the current situation, where medical users must find and buy marijuana from illegal drug dealers on the street. That puts not only the safety and efficacy of the drug in question, but also puts patients in potentially dangerous settings and circumstances.

We stress again that this bill is carefully crafted and includes a number of requirements and procedures for physicians, producers, distributors and end users -- all designed to ensure that the program functions as intended and is not abused.

This bill is similar to ones already on the books in 14 other states, and is a humanitarian effort to help patients with "debilitating medical conditions" such as cancer, multiple sclerosis and other painful diseases. Marijuana has also been effective in helping boost the appetites of some sick patients suffering from the wasting syndrome associated with diseases such as cancer and HIV/AIDS.

If Maryland is going to be truly helpful and compassionate to suffering people for whom marijuana could bring relief, the state should adopt this new bill into law. What we have now is a half-hearted effort -- an attempt to have it both ways -- that permits the use of medical marijuana, but leaves it uncontrolled, unsafe and tainted by illegality.

The Zirkin-Morhaim bill is also a worthy piece of legislation, as it would downgrade marijuana from a Schedule I to a Schedule II drug. As a Schedule I drug, marijuana is in the company of such substances as heroin and LSD. While even Schedule II -- which includes cocaine, morphine, methamphetamine and oxycodone -- may still be inapt, Schedule II drugs can be legally prescribed under federal standards; Schedule I drugs cannot.

This is a sensible bill and a good companion piece for the medical marijuana bill. It would also offer some added protection for the medical community, as well as send a message to Washington that Maryland recognizes that the current Schedule I designation for marijuana is inappropriate and discourages its legitimate medical use.

We salute Brinkley, Morhaim and Zirkin for their willingness to sponsor these politically sensitive but compassionate pieces of legislation, and urge the General Assembly to pass them promptly.