



## Obama drug-policy adviser says the administration opposes marijuana legalization and isn't big on medical marijuana

MIKE DENNISON Gazette State Bureau | Posted: Friday, September 24, 2010 5:10 pm

HELENA — The Obama administration adamantly opposes legalizing marijuana and has a dubious view of medical marijuana, a top White House drug policy adviser said here Thursday night.

Kevin Sabet, special adviser for policy at the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, said marijuana is a dangerous drug that causes documented health and social problems, and should not be subject to voter approval for its use.

"Marijuana cannot be the one exception in history of the world that doesn't go through a scientific process to be approved as medicine," he told the Montana Supreme Court Administrator's annual drug court conference in Helena. "It doesn't make any sense.

"How can we imagine that a dangerous, illegal drug like marijuana should be voted on by the people? That's not how we do medicine in this country."

Montana voters in 2004 approved a medical marijuana program for the state, allowing people with debilitating diseases to get a doctor's approval to possess and smoke or otherwise ingest marijuana.

The program had only a few thousand users until a year ago, when the U.S. Justice Department issued a memo to federal prosecutors, telling them that pursuing medical marijuana patients or their caregivers is not a priority in states that have approved medical marijuana.

Since then, Montana's number of medical marijuana cardholders has increased by nearly 20,000. Various traveling "clinics" have criss-crossed the state, sometimes issuing hundreds of cards in a single day.

Sabet said the Justice Department memo has been "widely misinterpreted" by the media and proponents of legalizing marijuana, and that it does not give marijuana growers or suppliers a blank check to produce pot in states with medical marijuana programs.

"If you actually read the memo, it's very sensible," he said. "(But) it didn't take more than a week for us to put out our own clarifying statement: That people cannot hide behind medical marijuana as a guise for legalization."

The memo, penned by Deputy Attorney General David Ogden last October, says federal prosecutors shouldn't focus on medical marijuana patients or caregivers who are "in clear and unambiguous compliance with existing state law."

However, it also says this recommendation does not legalize marijuana in these states, provide any legal defense to violation of federal drug laws, or protect those using medical marijuana laws "as a pretext for the production or distribution of marijuana for purposes not authorized by state law."

Sabet said he believes medical marijuana programs are part of a strategy to legalize marijuana, and that the Obama administration is staunchly opposed to legalization.

Research shows that marijuana use causes health problems, can be addictive, and kills and injures people on roadways, among other things, he said.

Legalizing marijuana will increase its usage, increase arrests for drug-related behavior and won't eliminate a black market for the drug, Sabet said.

"Our two legal drugs, tobacco and alcohol, serve as frightening examples of legalization," he said. "Look at the alcohol industry. It does not make money off the 10 people who drink one drink a week. It makes money off of the one person who drinks 50 drinks a week. Addiction is incentivized in this business."

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Sabet also said legalization proponents have created a “false dichotomy” by suggesting the only alternatives are legalization or a harsh, punitive approach that emphasizes incarceration.

Those aren't the only options, and the Obama administration favors an approach that pairs treatment with law enforcement, to reduce illegal drug usage and addiction without sending people to prison, he said.