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HEADLINE: IOM report sends mixed signals on use of marijuana as medicine.

BODY:

While concluding that marijuana's active ingredients are potentially effective in treating intractable pain, chemotherapy-induced nausea and anorexia caused by AIDS wasting syndrome, an Institute of Medicine (IOM) report released last week stopped short of fully endorsing the use of marijuana for medical purposes. The report instead called for clinical trials geared to developing non-smoked cannabinoid-based medications.

Although the report gives ammunition to supporters of medical marijuana by providing a scientific basis for its potential benefits, it downplays the use of smoked marijuana, citing its health detriments and advocating its use only after all other approved medications have failed.

The IOM report rejects marijuana legalization and concludes that patients would receive the greatest benefit from a non-smoked, rapid-onset cannabinoid delivery system. The report does, however, call for clinical trials on short-term use of smoked marijuana and rejects the notion that marijuana is a gateway to the use of narcotics.

What remains uncertain is how the federal government will react to the report's findings. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), which commissioned the analysis in 1997, gave no indication in a printed statement last week that its opposition to medical use of smoked marijuana would change.

While praising the scientific basis of the study, the ONDCP statement emphasized the report's observation that the future of cannabinoid medications lies in the use of nonsmoked, chemically defined drugs.

The IOM report frames the medical marijuana argument in terms of how the drug's components can be effectively used for pain treatment, essentially dismissing any contention that marijuana provides no medical benefits whatsoever.

"The report knocks down some of the myths often cited about the addictive quality of marijuana, withdrawal concerns, and whether the drug is a gateway," Allen St. Pierre, executive director of the NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) Foundation, which advocates legalization of private, responsible use of marijuana, told ADAW.

Voters in seven states have passed ballot initiatives permitting the use of marijuana as medicine. But this has not stopped the U.S. Department of Justice from enforcing federal laws outlawing possession of marijuana, particularly in California, where cannabis buyers' clubs have been shut down in Oakland and San Jose.

New California Attorney General Bill Lockyer is intensifying efforts to place California's medical marijuana initiative in effect, reversing the position of his predecessor, Dan Lungren, who had opposed the law (see ADAW, March 8).

In Oregon, officials are just starting to implement a medical marijuana initiative that voters approved last year. A spokesman in the state attorney general's office told ADAW that while the IOM report will not influence how the state will structure its program, there is uncertainty about how the federal government will react to state implementation.

Alaska, Colorado, Nevada and Washington also passed ballot initiatives last year. The Justice Department is believed to be reviewing the initiatives.

The IOM report, *Marijuana and Medicine: Assessing the Science Base*, was based on an analysis of relevant scientific literature; workshops that included scientific presentations and public input; site visits to cannabis buyers' clubs and HIV/ AIDS clinics; consultations with biomedical and social scientists; and public comments on a Web site.

The report recommends that research continue into the physiological effects of cannabinoids. It found that the potential therapeutic value for cannabinoid drugs includes pain relief, control of nausea and vomiting, and appetite stimulation. These effects are best-established for THC, one of the two most abundant cannabinoids in marijuana.

The report states that marijuana's effect on these symptoms is modest, but added that cannabinoids could be moderately well-suited to treat chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting and AIDS wasting. The authors emphasize that purified cannabinoid compounds are more effective than smoked marijuana.

In addition, the report found that marijuana's adverse effects are within the range of effects tolerated for other medications, with the primary adverse effect being diminished psychomotor performance. Authors stated that the chronic effects of smoking marijuana, including an increased risk of cancer and respiratory disease, are of greater concern and merit further analysis.

The report found no data supporting the notion that sanctioning medical use of marijuana would increase recreational use in the general population.

Authors of the report reject the long-term medical use of marijuana, citing the hazards of smoking while also acknowledging that long-term issues are not concerns for terminally ill patients or those with debilitating pain. The report calls for clinical trials of smoked marijuana for short-term use of less than six months.

Copies of the Institute of Medicine report *Marijuana and Medicine: Assessing the Science Base* are available by contacting the National Academy Press at (800) 6246242. The report costs \$ 44.95 plus shipping charges.