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Institute of Medicine Investigators Visit The San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club

Some influential figures in the medical establishment were embarrassed by the Dec. 30, 1996 press conference at which top federal officials dismissed as "Cheech and Chong medicine" a therapeutic agent they knew to be effective and safe. An editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* — "Federal Foolishness and Marijuana," by Jerome Kassirer, MD, the editor-in-chief — called the federal policy "misguided," "hypocritical," "out of step with the public," and "inhumane... the absolute power of bureaucrats whose decisions are based more on reflexive ideology and political correctness than on compassion."

On January 30, 1997, the very day the *NEJM* editorial ran, Dr. Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, announced that there would be a special conference to resolve "the public health dilemma" raised by the passage of Prop 215.

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"I don't think anyone wants to settle issues like this by plebiscite," said Varmus, calling instead for "a way to listen to experts on these topics."

There followed a conference in February, organized by Alan Leshner of the National Institute of Drug Abuse, at which various experts decreed that there was no proof that marijuana was safe and effective medicine in treating pain, neurological and movement disorders, etc., and called for "more and better studies."

McCaffrey changed his line and announced a \$1.5 million allocation for a study by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) on the medical potential (and dangers) of marijuana. Somebody evidently had explained to him that the NIH, NIDA, the DEA, and the FDA could be counted on to run a four-cornered stall that would justify the prohibition for years to come.

The IOM study was conducted by two male MD "investigators" — Stanley J. Watson, a research psychiatrist from the University of Michigan and John A. Benson, a professor emeritus from Oregon Health Sciences University — and three female "staff." In December '97, the IOM team visited Bay Area cannabis



CONSTANCE PECHURA, STANLEY J. WATSON, MD, AND JOHN A. BENSON, MD, visited the San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club in December 1997. Dennis Peron seemed subdued as he explained where he was coming from.

buyers clubs. They came the day after an appellate court had ruled that Dennis Peron's club was illegal. The headlines carried Lungren's vow to close down all the clubs.

Their first stop was the Oakland Cannabis Buyers Co-operative, where Jeff Jones and staff described their operation in great detail. The OCBC had prepared diligently for the meeting, and presented the IOM team with a report on the conditions their members were presenting with. Tod Mikuriya, MD, explained the advantages of vaporization over smoking. The doctors nodded and the staff took notes.

It so happened that Watson *et al* arrived at the Market St. club while a memorial service was being held. They went to get some lunch while on the fourth floor Dennis Peron sat alone in the last row, head bowed as friends, co-workers, and family members recalled Ken M., a person with AIDS who had worked at the club for four years. "The friendliest guy... we always used to talk baseball... He was one of the best warriors for medicinal marijuana... When we marched on the DEA, it was Ken who made up those wonderful chants..."

When he finally spoke with the IOM team in his office, Dennis explained that his head was someplace else; his right to operate, confirmed by the people of California, had just been taken away by three judges. He'd glanced at their questionnaire, he said, but it was buried

under a pile of paper on his desk.

Somebody came into the office with Ken's ashes under his arm, said goodbye, and exited. Dennis turned back to the IOM team with a generalization:

"People's responses to marijuana are like an inverted U. On one end of the U there are people who should never do marijuana. They take a puff of it, they get red, they cough, they get paranoid, they feel like death is imminent. And on the other end of that U is somebody in a wheelchair or they're in constant pain, they should never be without it. In between is everybody else.

"This is a club of last resort for some people," he went on. "How I run it is, I try to think of it as a country club for poor people who have never really had much in their life. And now that they are physically challenged, they even have less. Most of them are living on SSI in tiny one-room hotels downtown where everything's crazy and the bathroom's down the hall and there's screaming people down the hall.

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"Marijuana is part of it, but the biggest part of healing is not being alone." —Dennis Peron

sanctuary for them. There's comfortable couches, there's places to sit at tables and talk. You'll see combinations you never see outside except on a bus: a black person with a white person with a brown person with a gay person, all at the same table, all sharing a part of their life. I like to think of this as a giant group therapy! And no matter what you got, this is therapy for it. And marijuana is part of it, but the biggest part of healing is not being alone. They always find that people who are alone die faster."

Dennis told the doctors, frankly but diplomatically, that he was skeptical about their mission. "You know, the medical potential of marijuana has been studied to death. The Shafer commission came back — you remember that one, 1972? Nixon appoints this commission. 'I want you to study it.' The commission comes back and says 'Legalize.' 'We can't do that!' So he totally disregarded the commission's voice..."

"The National Academy of Sciences, 1981-82 report, originally commissioned by Jimmy Carter..." The investigators nodded as if they'd just read it. "It was vague, it was ambiguous, but there was enough room to reschedule marijuana. Only by then Reagan was president and he threw the report in the garbage. Wouldn't even publish it for a while. Then there was the DEA study that they chose to ignore, Judge Francis Young, 1988... And now there'll be another study."

After a beat Dr. Benson smiled and said, "Help us," in an earnest, encouraging tone that implied, "the medical establishment is all ears."

Dennis said he would show them around the club.



JEFF JONES (RIGHT) SHOWING CLONES TO (from right) John Benson, MD, Stanley Watson, MD, Janet Joy, and Constance Pechura of the Institute of Medicine as Tod Mikuriya, MD, observes. Despite Mikuriya's account of its advantages over smoking, there would be no mention of vaporization in the IOM report.



DENNIS PERON attending a memorial service on the fourth floor of the SFCBC (while the IOM investigators were at lunch).