

Drug measures on Oregon ballot

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — War veterans with PTSD, terminally ill patients and others suffering from anxiety are backing a ballot measure that would legalize controlled, therapeutic use in Oregon of psilocybin mushrooms, which they say has helped them immeasurably.

“After chemo failed, I went to a pretty dark place,” said Mara McGraw, a Portland woman who has terminal cancer. “I was feeling hopeless about treatment and about the future.”

Then she tried the psychedelic mushroom, more commonly known as “magic mushrooms,” with a trained facilitator standing by.

“It was a very safe and nurturing experience for me. I immediately felt a release from the fear,” McGraw told a video news conference.

On the national level, a clinical trial of psilocybin is underway to test its potential antidepressant properties, the U.S. government’s National Library of Medicine says. Backers of Measure 109 say the state, which was the first in the nation to decriminalize marijuana, should lead the way in legalizing therapeutic, regulated use of psilocybin, often referred to as magic mushrooms.

A second Oregon ballot question, Measure 110, would decriminalize possession of small amounts of heroin, cocaine, LSD, oxycodone and some other drugs. Its backers say drug addiction is a health issue and should not cause people to be imprisoned and saddled with criminal records. If Oregon voters approve Measure 110, the state would be the first to decriminalize those drugs.

The psilocybin initiative, however, is about overcoming depression, supporters say.

“An estimated 1 in every 5 adults in Oregon is coping with a mental health condition,” 20 doctors and other health care workers wrote in the voters pamphlet. “We

support Measure 109 because it provides a new treatment for many that might break through where others fall short.”

It would require the Oregon Health Authority to allow licensed, regulated production and possession of psilocybin exclusively for administration by licensed facilitators to clients. There would be a two-year development period for the program.

The only argument in opposition in the pamphlet came from the Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association and the American Psychiatric Association.

“We believe that science does not yet indicate that psilocybin is a safe medical treatment for mental health conditions,” the groups said.

But several military veterans believe psilocybin therapy is a life-saver, especially when suicide among veterans is so high. Some 20 veterans die by suicide each day in the U.S., about 1.5 times higher than those who have not served in the military.

Chad Kuske said he developed post-traumatic stress disorder after serving as a Navy SEAL for 18 years with 12 combat deployments.

“I was really suffering from stress, anxiety, depression. I was angry all the time,” Kuske said. Then a former member of his team visited Kuske in Portland on his way to a psilocybin therapy session. Through his friend, Kuske also signed up for one.

“I’m very fortunate that that I was able to find this therapy, administered by people who care and who really had my best interests in mind and do it in the proper setting,” Kuske told reporters in a video call.

“There’s no way that the words that I can use could really explain it,” Kuske said. “It’s not an overestimate by any means to say that it saved my life, because the path that I was taking would have eventually just led me to continued suffering, jail or or death. I don’t know that I would have ever really broken the cycle of

returning to alcohol and drugs without this.”

In a psilocybin session that lasts for hours, subjects often have eyeshades and headphones on, to help them look inward, said Chris Stauffer, physician scientist at the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center who conducts clinical trials of psychedelic-assisted therapy. He’s also an assistant professor of psychiatry at the Oregon Health & Science University.

For music, Stauffer tends to borrow from a “Psilocybin Research: Johns Hopkins” playlist on Spotify, featuring classical composers such as Vivaldi and Brahms and calming New Age and flute music. The playlist ends on an upbeat note, with “What a Wonderful World,” sung by Louis Armstrong.

“We try to make space for the entire range of emotional

experience, knowing that whatever comes up is coming up for healing,” Stauffer said in an interview. “Even if it’s something that seems scary or overwhelming, we encourage them to move into it and try to move through it and not avoid it.”

The other drug-related ballot measure, the Drug Addiction Treatment and Recovery Act, recently received a \$500,000 donation from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Dr. Priscilla Chan.

“Its significance is monumental: If the measure passes, Oregon will shift to a health-based approach to drugs and addiction,” the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative website says. “Instead of arrests and criminal convictions, people possessing small amounts of drugs will get civil infractions that can be waived if they get

assessed for drug treatment needs.”

All marijuana tax revenue above \$11.25 million quarterly would fund addiction recovery centers, along with legislative appropriations and any savings from reductions in arrests and incarceration resulting from the measure.

Among those in support are the Oregon Nurses Association and the Oregon chapter of the American College of Physicians.

About two dozen district attorneys in Oregon are urging a no vote.

“This measure recklessly decriminalizes possession of the most dangerous types of drugs, including methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin and ecstasy,” they wrote in the voters’ pamphlet. “Decriminalization will lead to an increase in acceptability of dangerous drugs.”

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