

Up in smoke

After two years, a local CBC is out of business, and access to medicinal marijuana is being complicated by mistrust and infighting

by Inga Sorensen

For Diane Densmore, it came down to one thing: the medicine.

"And they couldn't get it. If they were able to, we would have stayed with them, but it wasn't happening. What were we supposed to do?" asks Densmore, who says she is living with a host of disabling ailments including irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis and chronic pain stemming from a back injury.

Densmore is discussing why she and purportedly many other consumers of the now-defunct Portland Cannabis Buyers Club were essentially forced to seek relief elsewhere.

Just Out first reported on the local CBC in a May 19, 1995, cover story, "The Dope on Cannabis." At that point the club was in its embryonic stage, with less than a dozen members.

"I was number 21," Densmore says. "I was there pretty much at the beginning."

Like others living with chronic illness, Densmore says she "was there" because she found that using marijuana for medicinal purposes relieved pain more effectively than legally available medication.

The Clinton administration recently announced it would oppose voter-approved initiatives in California and Arizona that allow marijuana to be used for medicinal purposes.

Donna Shalala, U.S. secretary of health and human services, flatly contended that "all available research has concluded that marijuana is dangerous to our health."

Marijuana is outlawed by the federal Controlled Substances Act, and federal officials say they are sending notices to medical groups and licensing boards nationwide warning that physicians who recommend or prescribe illegal drugs including marijuana will lose their authority to dispense certain drugs, and may be barred from treating patients through Medicaid or Medicare.

Yet while the Clinton administration, as well as past administrations, has maintained there is no scientific proof that medicinal marijuana works, the personal testimonies of consumers like Densmore—and thousands of others living with AIDS, cancer, glaucoma or multiple sclerosis—unequivocally contend that it does.

And these thousands have flocked to CBCs for their medicine.

"That's what this has always been about—helping sick people," says Portland resident David

Olstein, 35, whose partner Marc Brown, 30, took a lead role in establishing the Portland CBC. Both men are living with HIV/AIDS.

Olstein says his partner is now too sick to speak with us, but in 1995 Brown told us he was motivated to launch a buyers club after watching a former partner suffer from wasting syndrome and die.

"People shouldn't have to suffer like that if they don't have to," he said.

Marijuana, he added, helped counter wasting syndrome and nausea by stimulating people's appetite.

During the following year and a half—and after a spurt of media attention—the Portland CBC's consumer list would grow to an estimated 300 members.

Though Densmore says consumers initially received their medicine, she maintains the CBC was plagued by mismanagement and, in some cases, unethical activity.

The charges include price gouging, the vindictive cutting off of some consumers, and the hoarding of quality marijuana.

"It was felt that a few people were keeping the best medicine for themselves and leaving the poor quality stuff for everyone else," Densmore says.

The CBC closed in September because, says Olstein, CBC suppliers failed to provide high-quality cannabis.

Several weeks later, Olstein contacted the Portland Police Bureau and Drug Enforcement Agency to turn in a well-known local marijuana-law reform activist, Phil Smith, who was reportedly caught growing 45 marijuana plants in his home.

Olstein says he had been working with marijuana growers like Smith and the Portland chapter

of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws to obtain supplies.

"The way we saw it, if people didn't have the money, but needed the medicine, we gave it to them. That was the mindset we were working with," says Olstein.

He says suppliers, however, had a different idea, including jacking up prices to unreasonable levels. "They just told us to charge members

more," says Olstein. "They saw the potential to exploit sick people and ran with it."

Another problem, he says, is that suppliers "pushed a bigger agenda" including the passage of a statewide initiative that would have legalized marijuana and permitted its sale in liquor stores.

"We wanted to keep the focus on medicinal marijuana," says Olstein. "We wouldn't support their overall agenda."

The conflicts, he adds, were too big to overcome.

They led to the CBC's closure and an ensuing squabble that not only included the Smith incident, but a dispute with another activist, Chris Iverson, who is behind the fledgling Alternative Health Center, which promotes holistic health remedies.

According to a Dec. 18 *Willamette Week* article, "Smith says he was growing the [45] plants for Iverson, who was starting a new cannabis buyers club called the Alternative Health Center, which would pick up where the original club left off."

The paper suggested that Olstein turned Smith in because he "felt that if he couldn't make a go of it, no one should."

Iverson says he has been the target of Olstein

tirades, and maintains he doesn't know why Olstein is "harassing" him.

The verbal attacks have gotten ugly, with Iverson claiming Olstein is suffering from "dementia."

In turn, Olstein says Iverson "is basically a drug lord" who shouldn't be involved in the medicinal marijuana business "because he's not even sick."

Olstein also says the original CBC sterilized the product to make it safe for consumption for those who have suppressed immune systems.

"They're not going to do that. It's not safe for people with AIDS and other illnesses," he says.

Iverson wouldn't comment on whether medicinal marijuana was being made available via the Alternative Health Center.

As for the criticism that CBCs should be operated by consumers, Iverson says he can understand why some people feel that way, "but if a healthy person can get this going than so be it."

Sandee Burbank, founder of Mothers Against Misuse & Abuse, says, "I know there are a lot of politics here.... It's too bad this is all so male-dominated."

Burbank, who lives in Mosier, founded MAMA in 1982. The group advocates in part for a rational drug policy and questions the government's crusade against substances like marijuana while ignoring the widespread abuse of legal drugs like alcohol and tobacco.

"It's sad that rivalries get in the way of people getting their medicine," she says. "It's a huge responsibility to become a provider. When you mention those names [Brown, Olstein and Iverson] I think of courageous people who are willing to take on that responsibility."

Densmore, meanwhile, says she has established a relationship with Iverson's Alternative Health Center and is receiving relief.

However, she says she remains "a little shellshocked" from all the controversy. "[CBC members] have been hurt by this. It makes you less willing to put your trust into others.... We'll just have to see how things go."

For his part, Olstein says he is somewhat worried about his well-being in light of his decision to go to law enforcement officials.

"But I just couldn't stand by and watch sick and dying people be exploited," he says.

Iverson adds, "I'm not nervous.... I know what kind of a war we're fighting."



*Nora Isacson
Portland's Alternative Realtor*

I have chosen to take a more human approach as a Realtor. I build my business on a referral basis and firmly believe that the satisfaction of my client is far more important than my financial gain. I communicate clearly and openly, and I'm always honest with my clients. I'll gladly climb a nearby tree to check on a roof or get a bit dirty investigating a crawl space or an attic. I work mainly in Portland's close-in Southeast and Northeast neighborhoods and specialize in older homes with character. Whether you're thinking of buying or selling, *please do give me a call.*

Nora Isacson

The Prudential
Performance Group
One, Inc. REALTORS®

215 SE 102nd, Suite 300
Portland, OR 97216
(503) 256-1234
VM/pgr 9503) 948-5610

DON'T SAY YOU CAN'T GET A HOME LOAN UNTIL YOU'VE PHONED HOME

We handle all conventional and nonconventional loans.

- First Time Buyers • FHA/VA Loans • Self-Employed
- Bankruptcies & Foreclosures • Complicated Borrowers
- Investment Properties • Manufactured Housing/Land
- Credit Problems • 3% Down Programs
- Pre-approvals for Purchase

*We're your full service
mortgage company.*

*Call today for a
free qualification
over the phone.*

Christine C. Hall
Mortgage Broker

503/870-1666

HOME
MORTGAGE CORP.

