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Gore Backs Medical Marijuana



By Dana Hill
 ABCNEWS.com

D E R R Y, N.H., Dec. 15 — Breaking with the White House for the second time in two days, Vice President Al Gore on Tuesday declared his support for letting doctors prescribe marijuana for medicinal purposes in properly controlled situations.

“I do not favor legalizing marijuana and I don’t favor doing it through the back door which some of these state initiatives tend to aim toward,” Gore said, referring to a series of recent successful ballot measures. “But I think that where you have sufficient controls, I think that doctors ought to have that option.”

Gore’s advocacy of medicinal marijuana stakes out yet another new position on a divisive social question that stands in contrast to the Clinton administration’s stance. On Monday, Gore’s aides released a statement calling for the elimination of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on gays in the military.

Gore Sister Tried Medical Marijuana

Gore’s marijuana comments came in response to a question in a WNDS-TV forum, in which Gore described the painful chemotherapy treatments that his sister, Nancy Hunger, underwent as she battled lung cancer before her death.

“[Marijuana] was prescribed for her and she decided against it, because she didn’t like it; It didn’t produce the desired result for her,” said Gore, “But the doctor said, ‘Look, this is an option that she ought to have available. Very carefully monitored and controlled.’ If it had worked for her, I think she should have had the ability to get her pain relieved that way.”

Later in the forum, Gore was asked again about the issue

Comments Mark New Break With Clinton Administration

Vice President Al Gore on Tuesday declared his support for letting doctors prescribe marijuana for medicinal purposes in properly controlled situations. (Jamie-Andrea Yanak/AP Photo)

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and reiterated his position as a balance between two values:

“I think that it would be a terrible mistake to legalize marijuana,” Gore said, noting that “The marijuana that’s commonly available today, I’m told, is many times stronger typically than the kind of marijuana that was commonly available several decades ago, which my generation thinks about when debating this issue.”

“[However], I think that where the alleviation of pain is concerned,” Gore sighed, “we have not given doctors enough flexibility to help patients who are going through acute pain. Many of us have seen that for ourselves. It’s all too easy to come up with this reason or that reason why a doctor can’t use what is gonna be most effective for the alleviation of pain. So how do you reconcile these two values, that’s what I’m trying to get at.”

The vice president’s Democratic primary opponent, former Senator Bill Bradley, had called for further study of marijuana’s use for medicinal purposes at an earlier forum, also in New Hampshire.

Cannon Fodder for GOP?

But Gore’s Republican rivals will likely not be so forgiving. An official from the Republican National Committee, watching the debate with reporters, requested a video copy of the show from WNDS — a necessary bit of preparation for any potential TV attack ads to be produced later on the issue. President Clinton’s remarks on drugs in an MTV forum provided fodder for a GOP ad in the 1996 campaign. In a hastily called news conference after the event, Gore assured reporters that he was opposed to the “backdoor legalization” efforts of several successful ballot initiatives and added a highly qualified version of his earlier statements.

“I just think that the decision has to be based, not on emotion, but on science, and research,” Gore said.

“If the research shows that if there are circumstances in which there are no alternatives for alleviating the pain then, under certain limited circumstances, if the research validates that choice, then it should be allowed. We are not at that point. Right now, we are at the point where the research was started again, it came up inconclusive and they’re re-examining the protocols of where to go.”

Gore went on to answer questions about his sister’s treatment with marijuana, recalling that she received it “in a prescription container with a label on it.” Gore also noted that her doctor was “one of the best in the entire world.” When faced with questions about the legality of prescribing marijuana in Tennessee in 1984, when his sister was facing the treatments, Gore aides quickly noted that marijuana was legal for medicinal use in Tennessee from 1981 to 1992.

The New Style

The departures on two controversial “kitchen-table” issues show the sometimes unexpected product of Gore’s new campaign style: Putting his candidacy before his vice presidency, and answering questions “from the heart” rather than sticking to the White House script.

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The new campaign style is meant to loosen Gore's stiff reputation. But this same, more freewheeling strategy has opened Gore to embarrassing missteps, like boasting perhaps too much about his role in shedding light on the Love Canal environmental disaster in the 1970s.

"That's the price of loosening up," said the conservative *Weekly Standard's* Tucker Carlson, traveling with the Gore campaign. "Bradley and McCain have gotten to where they are because they're both kind of loose cannons."

Even the vice president's aides seem to acknowledge that this off-the-cuff comment may become a distraction after a week of news dominated by campaign finance stories and Bill Bradley's medical condition. After hearing Gore's comments on medical marijuana, one aide quipped, "We were trying to get back on our health care message." ■

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