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January 1, 1996 By Sean Strub

It's faster than a speeding bullet, can leap entire members of Congress in a single bound, more effective than conferences, summits and clever sound bites—it's Presidential leadership! And here is a good test of it, gleaned from a letter to the editor in a recent edition of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

In 1988, then-administrator of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) Richard Bonner said this: "Those who insist that marijuana has medical uses would serve society by promoting and sponsoring more legitimate scientific research, rather than throwing their time, money and rhetoric into lobbying, public-relations campaigns and perennial litigation."

Highly respected AIDS researcher Donald Abrams, M.D., took this message to heart. He developed a study comparing inhaled marijuana to the prescription drug Marinol (dronabinol), a synthetic form of marijuana's active ingredient, THC. Abram's study was designed in conjunction with and approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the University of California, San Francisco, the California Research Advisory Panel and the scientific advisory committee of the San Francisco Community Consortium.

Abram's study would have finally determined the relative safety of the illegal, inhaled marijuana (does it exacerbate respiratory problem in people with AIDS?) versus the legal (when prescribed) Marinol. It would also have settled which drug, if either, was more effective. Both have AIDS advocates who swear by them to combat wasting syndrome, to relieve pain (including migraines) and to ease nausea.

Abrams found a licensed supplier of pharmaceutical-grade marijuana, Hortapharm, in the Netherlands, and sought to import enough for his study. But the DEA wouldn't allow it. A murderously slow nine months after receipt of Abram's letter, Director Alan Leshner of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), whose permission was also required, also rejected the request.

Meanwhile, the California legislature passed a bill a few months ago to allow physicians to prescribe marijuana for medicinal purposes. Governor Pete Wilson, perhaps bitter after his recent Presidential flop, vetoed it. And people with AIDS continue to waste away.

President Clinton, we know you didn't inhale, but some of us need to. To survive. You could, with one brief memo, order the DEA and NIDA to approve Abram's request. We're waiting.

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