



(L):“I think Monterey County is a bit behind Santa Cruz County in terms of realizing that there’s no shame or negativity associated with medical marijuana,” Dr. Deborah Malka says. (R): Attorney Richard Rosen, the attorney representing MyCaregiver Cooperative, Inc., says the county’s militant approach is putting patients in the red: “You can end up paying over \$10,000 once all’s said and done.”

A HAZY FUTURE – PART 1

Part 1: From the feds to the county, the confusion surrounding medical marijuana laws are enough to drive a girl to get stoned.

By [Rebecca Robinson](#)

Thursday, June 16, 2011

Compassionate Health Options is a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it kind of place.

Tucked away in a small, second-floor suite off Pacific Street in Monterey, its only signage is a faded piece of paper taped to a ground-level window that lists its phone number and website (and an image of a certain seven-leafed plant) and invites interested parties to “come in and go up the stairs.”

In the waiting room is a diverse crowd: a well-groomed middle-aged man; a sun-kissed young woman; a bleary-eyed father in sweats and an oversized T-shirt, boasting about his son’s Little League team.

I check boxes on the form handed to me by the receptionist as I wait for my appointment with Dr. Deborah Malka. I’m surprised by the breadth of questions about my physical and mental health, including an extensive checklist of symptoms for specific parts of the body – pelvis (“tender; non-tender”), skin (“intact; warm; dry; well-hydrated; no rashes”), etc.

After a few minutes, Dr. Malka emerges and says she’s ready for me. I follow her into the exam room, sit next to her desk, and we chat about the ailments (anxiety, insomnia) and the assignment that have brought me into her office. She asks for proof of residence, prescription numbers and names of my doctors.

“I think a tincture would be best for you,” she says. “It’s the best form of marijuana to address your needs” – and to get a medicinal dose without the lung-damaging effects.

Once she’s satisfied with my medical credentials, Malka signs and presents me with a piece of paper adorned with a golden seal. It’s a therapeutic cannabis recommendation – the first step toward obtaining a state-issued medical marijuana card.

“You can take that to a dispensary,” Malka says. “But you’ll have to go up to Santa Cruz.”

That’s because there are no dispensaries in Monterey County, despite the fact that medical marijuana is legal throughout the state.

The contradictions don’t stop there. City officials and local cops say state laws are a classically Californian clusterfuck, leaving them in the unenviable position of deciding what’s legit and what’s illegal. Patients and advocates, from moms to mermaids (really), say the state laws are crystal-clear: If you have a state-issued ID card, you can grow it, sell it, buy it, and, yes, stick it in your pipe and smoke it. But then the feds have been known to swoop in and supersede state law, creating confusion and occasionally locking up people, like Dr. Mollie Fry and Dale Schafer, who were abiding by California’s rules but are now wasting away, financially bankrupt, in federal prisons. Some cities, San Jose included, seem to have a handle on how to regulate the budding industry and extract tax revenue from it, but even Silicon Valley’s capital seems to contradict itself in practice, boasting of marijuana’s multi-million-dollar potential while simultaneously shutting down the bulk of its dispensaries.

As I seek a deeper understanding of how medical marijuana in Monterey County, and in California, really works – or doesn’t, as many seem to think – I find things getting ever hazier, and my anxiety ever more acute. Methinks my new cannabis card will come in handy.

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City after city – Marina, Monterey, Pacific Grove, Salinas, Sand City, Seaside – have passed ordinances in recent years prohibiting medical marijuana dispensaries from operating within their boundaries, either through temporary moratoriums or outright bans. In February, the city of Monterey, which extended its moratorium for another year in October 2010, served a warrant on medical marijuana collective MyCaregiver Cooperative, Inc. for continuing to dispense medicine at its Lighthouse Avenue storefront in violation of city code, and in defiance of two court injunctions.

The case went to trial in late May, but has been postponed until July 14 due to a lawyer no-show at a June 6 hearing.

Monterey City Manager Fred Meurer says the MyCaregiver drama is simply a case of deceptive business practices, not the city’s hostility towards medical marijuana.

“[The owners] snuck their business in without telling [the city] they’d be selling marijuana,” Meurer says. “They broke the law, then they ignored the court and continued to operate. It’s a land use and legal issue.”

Richard Rosen, a private attorney representing MyCaregiver, thinks that’s bunk.

"[My clients] have been accused of being in contempt of court, but whatever contempt they may be performing pales in comparison to the contempt of justice the city and county are showing," he says in his Salinas office.

From his perspective, Monterey County is interfering with the will of the people of California, who passed Proposition 215, the landmark Compassionate Use Act, 15 years ago.

"Allowing the use of medical marijuana is the law in all of California's 58 counties, and has been since 1996," he says. "There's nothing that says that dispensaries or collectives are illegal."

But there's nothing in the law that says they're legal, either. Therein lies the problem, according to Mark Caldwell, a narcotics detective with the Monterey County Sheriff's office.

"We in law enforcement would like some clarity that doesn't exist in the laws," he says. "The Compassionate Use Act is intended to 'allow more access [to medical marijuana].' But what does that mean? It doesn't say anything about dispensaries."

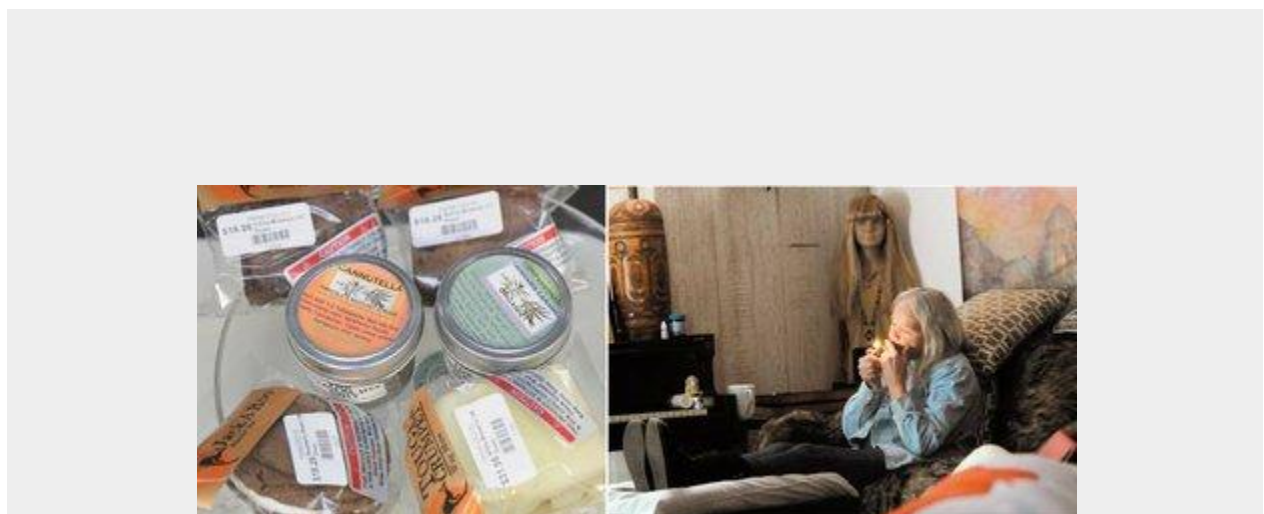
That's part of why some cities, like Santa Cruz and Santa Clara, allow them; and some, like Salinas and San Diego, don't.

He also cites the state's health and safety code that says patients only need a doctor's recommendation to obtain medical marijuana. "So is that a recommendation, or is it a written prescription that we all recognize?"

The law's ambiguity, Caldwell contends, makes it very open to interpretation. "Some choose a strict approach, others are more lax." He concedes that Monterey County falls into the former camp.

"[City officials] are enforcing their rights to allow or not allow dispensaries based on the way they see things, and the way their population pushes them," Caldwell says. "They aren't doing anything against the law."

Some residents, however, feel they're the ones being pushed around.



(L): The spread of edibles at Herbal Cruz Medical Marijuana Collective in Santa Cruz is downright indulgent: cheesecake, cookies, and Cannutella crowd the cases. (R): Massage therapist and healer Judy Song has used marijuana for most of her life to combat anxiety. Photo by [Nic Coury](#).

A HAZY FUTURE – PART 2

Part 2: The Medicine

By [Rebecca Robinson](#)

Thursday, June 16, 2011

To get to Judy Song's home, you must wend your way through Carmel Valley, whose hillsides, as Richard Rosen recalls, were the site of massive marijuana grow operations in the early '80s.

Song calls this her "healing retreat," her home-cum-wellness-center where she works as a massage therapist. The warm and wizened 71-year-old woman embraces me and welcomes me into her abode, filled with art, music and mermaids in every imaginable medium. ("I am one, you know," she says matter-of-factly, adding, "I'm also one-quarter Sioux.")

Out on the deck, she reveals a modest grow: five small marijuana plants, with a sixth just starting to sprout.

"When they're ready, I want to move them next to my tomatoes," she tells me, gesturing to the right as we walk to the main attraction: a 12-foot-tall tepee where, in keeping with her Native American roots, she conducts sweat lodge ceremonies.

Inside the tepee, Song shares her experiences with marijuana, which she says she's smoked for nearly 50 years to help her cope with crippling anxiety.

"It has helped promote my well-being," Song says as she smokes a joint. She calls marijuana "a sweet plant from God" that provides a natural and safe alternative to pharmaceuticals. She's a card-carrying medical marijuana patient, and used to go as far as San Jose to procure her pot.

"More people need to be able to access marijuana closer to them without going through shenanigans to get it," she says.

Now, she uses the weed delivery service Ethnobotanica (one of four mobile delivery operations serving Monterey County, according to [weedmaps.com](#)), and has Indica nuggets and pot brownies delivered to her home monthly.

"They're very professional, and they hold the line," Song says. "If you're not registered to be a patient, you just can't get any from them, period."

Ryan Booker, Ethnobotanica's CEO and general manager, backs this up.

"We run a healthy company, and we run it above board," Booker says. He started Ethnobotanica in 2008 when the economy went sour and he needed more income.

He'd been a green grower and caregiver for medical marijuana patients since 2003, and is a patient himself. Starting a business that allowed those patients without easy access a way to get their bud (or brownies) was a way for Booker to contribute to what he and many others view as holistic health care.

His instincts were good: Today, Ethnobotanica has 19 employees who assemble customer orders and provide home delivery in Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Luis Obispo Counties.

Booker says roughly one-third of Ethnobotanica's 1,600 members are from Monterey County, which it just started serving last year.

Song, one of Ethnobotanica's older members, got her state card from Dr. Malka, who's based in Santa Cruz but twice a week comes down to Compassionate Health Options' Monterey office, which just opened in March. It's a haul for Malka, but since many of her patients were coming up from Monterey to see her, she figured she'd come to them. She estimates she's seen about 200 patients at the Monterey office.

"I'd been hearing for many years that there was a need for a doctor in the area," she says. "I don't believe there are many doctors here who do medical marijuana evaluations." (Since the California Medical Board does not require licensed doctors to specify whether they prescribe medical marijuana, it's impossible to get exact figures.)

She faults a lack of familiarity with the guidelines established for doctors in the Compassionate Use Act and Senate Bill 420 (no joke), passed in 2003.

"Many doctors to this day don't know that they can clearly do this work," Malka says. "Most feel that they're risking their licenses in prescribing medical marijuana."

That fear drives some doctors to eschew medicinal marijuana, even for those patients who show a need for it. "I see patients like one I saw last Saturday: an older woman who'd never used marijuana before but had gotten cancer, done research, and saw that marijuana could ease some of her symptoms," Malka says. "She did that by herself, without her doctor suggesting it."

And, perhaps, in spite of her doctor discouraging it.

"We've all been raised with this stigma, that marijuana is a drug of abuse," Malka says.

Song agrees. "We've been conditioned to stay in the background, hide in the woodwork," she says. "But I'm ready to come forward with the whole picture."

She's not alone.

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"I'm trying to get more people to be legal about their marijuana use, while building a community of like-minded people," says Lisa Davis, the chatty receptionist at Compassionate Health Solutions. A thirty-something single mother of three and born and raised in Monterey, Davis is in the early stages of starting up a medical marijuana collective in her hometown.

"I want to pave the way for a better reputation for medical marijuana [in Monterey]. Honestly, the MyCaregiver scandal left a bad taste in everyone's mouths," Davis says. "Marijuana is still somewhat of a

hush-hush, taboo thing around here. But we're starting to see patients who are more conservative, older, career-type people. They're nervous at first, but we want to make them feel comfortable."

It seems to be working.

"A neighbor came in here the other day, and her husband works for the government, so that tells you something!" she says with a laugh.

She doubts law enforcement will dash her plan. But criminal defense attorney Andrew Liu, who spent 10 years as a prosecutor in the Bronx and then served as an assistant district attorney in Monterey County, is less trusting.

"They shoot first and ask questions later," says Liu, who's barely moved into his new Salinas office when we speak in April. His statement is based on experience—namely, his defense in 2009 of two young women, both medical marijuana patients, who were arrested when more than four pounds of marijuana was found in their car.

The DA's office charged them with multiple felonies, including possession and illegal transportation of marijuana, despite the fact that both had state-issued medical marijuana cards. The court dismissed the case after hearing copious evidence that both discredited the arresting officer's testimony and clarified that, because of a 2008 California Supreme Court ruling, the women could possess as much marijuana as they needed to manage their illnesses.

"It was dozens of hours of work on the defense side," Liu says. "And that's after the police officer made a traffic stop, did an investigation at the scene, went through the booking process and wrote up the report. All that time, that officer's not out there dealing with gang violence."

Critics believe not enough questions are asked in the prosecution process.

"The DA's office and law enforcement have a symbiotic relationship: They need each other," Rosen says. "Not only does the DA want the help of police in maintaining order, but the DA is an elected political position, and the endorsement of the police is important."

Monterey County Assistant District Attorney Berkley Brannon disagrees.

"The implication that we're too cozy with the police would mean that we did something we shouldn't have done, but there's scrutiny at every level of the legal process," he says. "We don't file every case we get; In fact, we reject a fairly significant number."

The exact number is unknown, he adds, since the office doesn't track cases by type. But generally, cases involving possession or cultivation of marijuana as the primary offense are trending downward.

"Law enforcement agencies have their own chiefs, and are governed by their own city officials, but I've always said that if a person has a recommendation from their doctor, police should try to make people prove it in court," Brannon says. "If at their arraignment they showed proof, the case would probably be dismissed."

Those cases are infrequent, Brannon says, but he suspects that the abuse of marijuana under the auspices of medicine is rampant.

“Most folks using marijuana do not have a serious illness,” Brannon says. “We don’t get involved with that, but I will say that there’s a lot of money to be made here. [Dispensaries] are incredibly lucrative.”

Like so many facets of medical marijuana in California, however, this claim is impossible to prove. There’s no state agency that regulates or audits dispensaries or delivery services, and no medical marijuana purveyor will admit to turning a profit. That would technically be illegal under California statutes.

“We don’t make a profit,” Ethnobotanica’s Booker insists. “Our money goes toward taxes, which are our biggest expense, followed by payroll and health care for our employees.” He’s happy to share stats on membership and his own salary (\$6,000 a month), but keeps mum about his company’s gross sales and physical location.

“I know how law enforcement will read that,” Booker says of his sales figures. “They’ll target us.” It wouldn’t be the first time. Ethnobotanica was raided by Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s officers in 2009 after Booker was pulled over (“An anonymous tip, they told me,” he says) while heading toward his company’s headquarters. The cops found pot and paraphernalia, along with a stack of doctors’ recommendations, in his car.

The case was thrown out, but Booker’s been secretive ever since. He wishes he didn’t have to be: “Regulation would be more productive than prohibition.”

Caldwell, the sheriff’s detective, says he believes there are people who have a legitimate use for medical marijuana. “But there’s a larger population that just wants to get high and use marijuana as a portal to make money,” he adds.

He lumps less reputable “pot doctors” in with dispensary owners on this charge. “Some doctors are a bit of a farce. I’ve seen doctors not even lay a hand on patients but give them a prescription. The doc makes money hand over fist.”

Malka doesn’t dispute there are plenty of fly-by-night doctors, but insists her multi-decade career as an herbal doctor, including five years prescribing medical marijuana, has never been about the money.

A HAZY FUTURE – PART 3

Part 3: The Money

Thursday, June 16, 2011

The profit motive is a compelling argument for increasing access to medical marijuana in California, particularly as the Golden State slashes services in its struggle to sustain solvency. Proponents of Proposition 19, last year’s unsuccessful ballot measure that would have legalized recreational marijuana,

boasted of the revenue their initiative could bring a cash-strapped state: a cool \$1.4 billion. (That estimate was issued by the state Board of Equalization in 2009 but later retracted.)

Some jurisdictions, seeing dollar signs and an opportunity to further regulate medicinal Mary Jane, have taken taxation of dispensaries and collectives into their own hands. Oakland voters overwhelmingly passed a taxation initiative, Measure F, in 2009, and the city of Los Angeles passed Measure M in March, expecting to raise between \$3 million and \$5 million a year in revenue. The San Jose City Council also passed a 7 percent tax on gross receipts of medical marijuana businesses in March, and recently reported raising \$290,000 from 73 pot clubs for the city's coffers in the first month of taxation. That's great news for a city facing a \$115 million budget deficit, but like all things cannabis in California, it gets complicated.

While San Jose is making mad money on medical marijuana, it's also working to eliminate all but 10 of its dispensaries under new proposed zoning regulations. According to a May 27 memo from Mayor Chuck Reed's office, \$1.2 million of the \$2.5 million projected marijuana business tax revenue in fiscal year 2011-2012 will be used for city management and police positions assigned to San Jose's new Medical Marijuana Regulatory Program, which is charged with shutting down the pot clubs that don't make the top 10 and collecting taxes from non-compliant facilities.

In essence, nearly half of the money being raised through the sale of marijuana will go towards shutting down the places that sell it.

City Councilman Pierluigi Oliverio estimates the new tax will net San Jose \$3.4 million per year if taxation stays at current levels, but that'll be a bit tricky if nearly 90 percent of the city's pot clubs are no longer allowed to operate – unless, of course, the remaining clubs expand enormously. There's also the fact that even though the city's collecting taxes from dispensaries and collectives, it considers them illegal under city code.

But that's not out of the ordinary, according to city spokesperson Michelle McGurk.

"All businesses in San Jose are required to pay business taxes, regardless of the legality of said business or its location," says McGurk. The Internal Revenue Service even has a place on its 1040 forms for businesses to list "Income from illegal activities, such as money from dealing illegal drugs" – including marijuana.

The time allotted by the City Manager's office for dispensary enforcement is staggering: "One thousand police overtime hours for enforcement and/or investigation work; regional coordination with other public agencies; state coordination with the Attorney General's Office and/or Department of Justice; supplies, training, public noticing, media purchases, community and stakeholder outreach; and unanticipated/unbudgeted costs associated with the unknown outcomes of beginning the process of closing down non-registered Medical Marijuana establishments and implementing the Medical Marijuana Regulatory Program."

That's not counting the 30 hours of city staff time for each application from a dispensary seeking to be one of the chosen few allowed to operate legally within city limits. All told, San Jose's allocating 12.7 full-time equivalent staff positions to the effort at a time when hundreds of public safety positions are being axed.

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General Manager Rich Couch and “budtender” Josh Voda, clad in matching black polo shirts with embroidered Herbal Cruz logos, both assure me that their prices are some of the lowest in town: \$45 for an eighth, \$13 for a four-dose cookie. That’s one reason the seven-month-old business has rapidly amassed more than 1,200 active members. But are all of them legitimate patients?

“I’d say it’s about half and half,” Voda says. “They all have the [state] card, and some truly do have life-threatening illnesses, but do all of them really need it? Probably not.”

Not that it matters, since they only serve patients with the required legal verification.

“We’ve never had any trouble from the police, but there are definitely other places nearby that have been raided,” Couch says. “I know law enforcement’s been doing ‘inspections’ in the past few months.”

Just last week, a trifecta of local, state and federal agencies descended with search warrants on five medical marijuana dispensaries in Fresno County in the culmination of “Operation Full Compliance.” The six-month investigation was spurred by complaints from people residing near the dispensaries of rising crime and increased traffic. Local officials claimed they had good reason to believe that the dispensaries were making a profit, and were thus in violation of state and federal law.

It’s part of a growing trend nationwide. In recent months, the U.S. Attorney’s Office has been sending threatening letters to the governors of the 16 states where medical marijuana is legal. From Rhode Island to Arizona, state health departments are hearing from the U.S. Attorney’s office that their planned collectives or dispensaries could face federal fines, raids or even criminal charges if they open.

The U.S. government’s hard-line policies on marijuana can clash with California’s more lenient laws – and, in some cases, override them. For California medical marijuana patients arrested by federal Drug Enforcement Agency officials, local and state laws no longer apply. The consequences of a DEA investigation can be costly and, in some cases, life-destroying.

“It changed everything,” says Geoffrey Schafer of the 2001 DEA raid on his El Dorado County home and subsequent arrest of his parents, Dr. Mollie Fry and Dale Schafer. Fry, a physician and breast cancer survivor, and her husband, an attorney, had a medical practice and grow operation that fully complied with state law, but they were convicted – and denied a medical marijuana defense. The government gave them the mandatory minimum 5-year sentence in 2007 for manufacturing and intending to distribute marijuana.

The couple had hoped the election of Barack Obama as president in November 2008 would represent a cultural sea change. Instead, the Department of Justice mounted an aggressive fight against Fry and Schafer’s appeal of their sentence, which was upheld in November 2010.

They surrendered to authorities on May 2.

“It’s tragic that the federal government finds it necessary to incarcerate two patients that they will have to medically care for, and ruin their family for strictly political reasons,” says Kris Hermes, a spokesperson for the marijuana advocacy group Americans for Safe Access. “The investigation, enforcement action, prosecution and incarceration causes U.S. taxpayers millions of dollars. It’s totally senseless.”

The Global Commission on Drug Policy, a panel of world leaders including past U.N. chief Kofi Annan and former Colombian president Cesar Gaviria, concurs. The body released a report June 2 declaring that the global war on drugs has failed, and recommended that governments experiment “with models of legal regulation of drugs to undermine the power of organized crime and safeguard the health and security of their citizens. This recommendation applies especially to cannabis.”

Geoffrey Schafer hopes his country heeds this advice, so more peoples’ lives aren’t turned upside down.

“This legal battle has left my family destitute,” says Schafer, who was 14 at the time of the raid on his parents’ operation. “We’re in so much debt from legal fees, and we’re torn apart.”

Fry is currently in the Dublin Federal Prison in Alameda County, while Dale Schafer is in Taft Federal Prison outside of Bakersfield. Their son resents the disconnect between state and federal laws that holds his family hostage.

“On the ground level at [California’s northern district] federal courthouse, you have people standing outside using marijuana,” he says. “But you go up to the 16th floor, and it’s a whole different world.”

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Monterey’s City Council was supposed to hear from the Planning Commission Tuesday on an ordinance that would regulate medical marijuana dispensaries, but that discussion has been postponed until July, according to city staff. The county’s pro – and anti-pot camps will be watching closely to see if they rule in favor of greater access or ban dispensaries outright, as numerous nearby cities have done.

At a public hearing on redistricting in Salinas last month, Colleen Houston spoke out against a district that linked Monterey County, where she resides, with Santa Cruz County, for one specific reason: the prevalence of pot in the northern neighbor.

“It’s been overwhelmingly decided by cities here that pot dispensaries were not wanted within our communities,” Houston said. “We spoke up about drug abuse and crime, and safety for our children. We don’t want any association that will impact our community standards.”

But standards, much like elements of California’s medical marijuana laws, are subjective, and the other side won’t go down without a fight.

I, on the other hand, am down for the count, exhausted after hours of cannabis conversations, car rides and court cases. My beat brain struggles to navigate the murky weed waters, and I’m still flummoxed by the conflicting laws and lives I’ve encountered in the great medical marijuana debate. I feel for all the patients, police, lawyers and judges (not to mention the moms and mermaids) who are on the blurry front lines of a mind-bending battle. With so much unsettling uncertainty surrounding me, only one thing’s for sure: I need a cookie. A cannabis cookie. Good thing I’ve got that four-dose chocolate chip delight from Herbal Cruz. It’s delicious – and legal. I think.

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It’s part of a growing trend nationwide. In recent months, the U.S. Attorney’s Office has been sending threatening letters to the governors of the 16 states where medical marijuana is legal. From Rhode Island to Arizona, state health departments are hearing from the U.S. Attorney’s office that their planned collectives or dispensaries could face federal fines, raids or even criminal charges if they open.

The U.S. government’s hard-line policies on marijuana can clash with California’s more lenient laws – and, in some cases, override them. For California medical marijuana patients arrested by federal Drug Enforcement Agency officials, local and state laws no longer apply. The consequences of a DEA investigation can be costly and, in some cases, life-destroying.

“It changed everything,” says Geoffrey Schafer of the 2001 DEA raid on his El Dorado County home and subsequent arrest of his parents, Dr. Mollie Fry and Dale Schafer. Fry, a physician and breast cancer survivor, and her husband, an attorney, had a medical practice and grow operation that fully complied with state law, but they were convicted – and denied a medical marijuana defense. The government gave them the mandatory minimum 5-year sentence in 2007 for manufacturing and intending to distribute marijuana.

The couple had hoped the election of Barack Obama as president in November 2008 would represent a cultural sea change. Instead, the Department of Justice mounted an aggressive fight against Fry and Schafer’s appeal of their sentence, which was upheld in November 2010.

They surrendered to authorities on May 2.

“It’s tragic that the federal government finds it necessary to incarcerate two patients that they will have to medically care for, and ruin their family for strictly political reasons,” says Kris Hermes, a spokesperson for the marijuana advocacy group Americans for Safe Access. “The investigation, enforcement action, prosecution and incarceration causes U.S. taxpayers millions of dollars. It’s totally senseless.”

The Global Commission on Drug Policy, a panel of world leaders including past U.N. chief Kofi Annan and former Colombian president Cesar Gaviria, concurs. The body released a report June 2 declaring that the global war on drugs has failed, and recommended that governments experiment “with models of legal regulation of drugs to undermine the power of organized crime and safeguard the health and security of their citizens. This recommendation applies especially to cannabis.”

Geoffrey Schafer hopes his country heeds this advice, so more peoples’ lives aren’t turned upside down.

“This legal battle has left my family destitute,” says Schafer, who was 14 at the time of the raid on his parents’ operation. “We’re in so much debt from legal fees, and we’re torn apart.”

Fry is currently in the Dublin Federal Prison in Alameda County, while Dale Schafer is in Taft Federal Prison outside of Bakersfield. Their son resents the disconnect between state and federal laws that holds his family hostage.

“On the ground level at [California’s northern district] federal courthouse, you have people standing outside using marijuana,” he says. “But you go up to the 16th floor, and it’s a whole different world.”

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Monterey’s City Council was supposed to hear from the Planning Commission Tuesday on an ordinance that would regulate medical marijuana dispensaries, but that discussion has been postponed until July, according to city staff. The county’s pro – and anti-pot camps will be watching closely to see if they rule in favor of greater access or ban dispensaries outright, as numerous nearby cities have done.

At a public hearing on redistricting in Salinas last month, Colleen Houston spoke out against a district that linked Monterey County, where she resides, with Santa Cruz County, for one specific reason: the prevalence of pot in the northern neighbor.

“It’s been overwhelmingly decided by cities here that pot dispensaries were not wanted within our communities,” Houston said. “We spoke up about drug abuse and crime, and safety for our children. We don’t want any association that will impact our community standards.”

But standards, much like elements of California’s medical marijuana laws, are subjective, and the other side won’t go down without a fight.