

ETHICS IN PRACTICE – Topic # 4

SHOULD ADDICTION COUNSELORS RECOMMEND MEDICAL MARIJUANA FOR CLIENTS IF APPROPRIATE?

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The ethics and legal issues around the use of Marijuana is complex to say the least. In Maine, marijuana use is legal and certain blends can be purchased "over the counter" and regulating it through setting up laws to prevent intoxicated citizens from driving while under-the-influence are being worked on at present. The ethical decisions that the Addiction Counselor are working with is also constantly changing, however first and foremost we are required to follow all laws and regulations, and to "do no harm" to our clients.

Ethically, this issue is an example of competing values and harm reduction, and helping clients to be safe, but it is "trumped" by the simple fact that Marijuana use in this country is a federal crime. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Social Worker's Code of Ethics outlines the professional roles and responsibilities of Counselors and Social Workers and charges us with advocating for social change, promoting our clients' health and well being and to uphold the laws that impact all of our lives.

Until or if the federal government changes certain laws which now make the use of marijuana illegal, we as Addiction Counselors are bound by law, and we should work to change laws that are not allowing for the best, ethical, effective treatment for our clients' substance abuse issues by advocating for treatments which cause no harm or

minimize addiction symptoms, which may include the use of medicinal marijuana for treatment of certain anxiety, pain, and other medical issues that our clients may have. I cannot find any other alternative method to not recommending medicinal marijuana use, because I feel that you are placing a client in a very dangerous situation and it could create more harm, like breaking federal regulations, and in-essence you are setting them up to fail. By the very fact they are working with addicts, who very well could have violated drug laws and could have been incarcerated, we are endangering their lives more by promoting marijuana use over the use of other medical drugs, some of which can be obtained legally by both state and federal regulations and medically prescribed. Isn't our job as Counselors to help clients to make more healthy and/or more positive or safe decisions? Is that decision to recommend marijuana to a client promoting illegal activities?

Recommending medical marijuana to a client based upon my research remains promoting the unlawful actions that a client does in Maine, even though it is legal to use marijuana in the State of Maine. Recommending marijuana use in any state is still asking or suggesting to our client to break federal laws.

Our ongoing challenge while we are addressing these complex issues is what provides the Addiction Counselor with many important opportunities to help our clients and uphold all laws while working to advocate for change in some consistent and more coinciding laws and make our laws all more clear.