

Dear Chairwoman Pugh,

I am writing in reference to the current marijuana dispensary bill. There is language that would add PTSD as a diagnosis that would allow the prescription of marijuana.

I write from the perspective of a psychiatrist with over 30 years of clinical experience (I am not writing on behalf of HowardCenter); the past 20 have been in Vermont working in our community mental health system.

I am not arguing that there are many people who experience trauma and are subsequently burdened by a variety of problems and challenges, some of which can be severe and debilitating. I am also not arguing that some may find subjective relief with marijuana.

The challenge, however, is that, even by adding the qualifier of “severe”, we are still going to have to wrestle with the subjective nature of human distress. Anyone can go online and read about the symptoms of PTSD and the walk into a doctor’s office and recite them. There is no way to objectively confirm what a person tells you. When the drug being sought is one that is otherwise illegal and is well known to provide a pleasurable experience for most people regardless of diagnosis, the motivation to amplify symptoms or disability increases. The DSM that doctors use to make psychiatric diagnoses is somewhat illusory. The label “disorder” confers a mistaken notion that it is a discrete disease entity and that doctors have the ability to clearly and definitively distinguish between what is disorder from what is desire, want, or discomfort. I realize that I can just say no to a patient’s request. The law does not require me to prescribe anything I do not think is indicated. However, I have already been confronted with patients who demand I prescribe this drug for them. It occurs even when there is good evidence that the drug may do harm. It can become almost impossible to even discuss other options for treatment. In addition, there will be physicians who are more permissive than I. We do not need to imagine what could happen. We have already seen this problem with other drugs whose properties cross the boundary of providing both recreational pleasure and relief of pain – be it subjective or physical.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to discuss this issue further at your convenience.

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