

Addressing Disparities between Medical and Recreational Cannabis Use & Setting the Legal Age for Recreational at 25 for Healthy Brain Development

Vermont law (18 V.S.A. Chapter 86) defines a debilitating medical condition as a specific disease or condition, described in section (A) or (B), where reasonable medical efforts have been made over a reasonable amount of time without success to relieve the symptoms:

(A) cancer, multiple sclerosis, positive status for human immunodeficiency virus, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or the treatment of these conditions, if the disease or the treatment results in severe, persistent, and intractable symptoms; or

(B) a disease, medical condition, or its treatment that is chronic, debilitating, and produces severe, persistent, and one or more of the following intractable symptoms: cachexia or wasting syndrome; severe pain; severe nausea; or seizures.

Before the state of Vermont considers the legalization of recreational cannabis, we need to expand access to the medical marijuana program and expand the list of qualifying conditions. It is imperative to address medical needs first for ethical reasons. There are many conditions that are not represented in VT's current list. We need to include Migraines, Parkinson's, Lyme, Alzheimer's, Autism, Glaucoma, Crohn's disease, Arthritis, exercise induced asthma, cancer treatment (for certain cancers, not just pain and side effects of cancer treatment), PTSD, anxiety, depression, anorexia, and bone healing. This is not an exhaustive list. According to Paul Armentano of NORML, "there are approximately 22,000 published studies or reviews in the scientific literature referencing the cannabis plant and its cannabinoids." In spite of the national prohibition on research, research abounds on the medicinal properties of marijuana.

The nonpartisan National Bureau of Economic Research reports that "states permitting medical marijuana dispensaries experience a relative decrease in both opioid addictions and opioid overdose deaths compared to states that do not." Another study, shared in a 2014 Journal of the American Medical Association, concludes that "states with medical cannabis laws had a 24.8 percent lower mean annual opioid overdose mortality rate compared with states without medical cannabis laws." The state of Vermont currently restricts medical access to a degree that we are not going to realize these positive trends. Let's change this first before legalizing recreational use. Expanding the medical program will save lives in Vermont.

It is unethical to put recreational use ahead of medical use for a variety of reasons. It is possible that someone with a medical need would not be able to get onto the VT registry prior to the legalization of recreational marijuana. Legalization of recreational use will put some individuals into the situation of buying a recreational product for medical use (and being taxed at a very high rate for a medicine they need). In addition, recreational growers will not prioritize strains that are not psychoactive that may be most beneficial for some medical conditions. Vermont's current list of qualifying conditions is too short.

And, there is little reason to keep costs low for recreational use, whereas for medical use, it's important that cannabis be affordable for anyone who needs it.

Why should medical marijuana be more highly regulated in ways that makes it harder to access than recreational? Other obstacles exist for people trying to get onto the registry. For instance, why should someone have to wait 6 months of treatment under a provider to get medical marijuana when soon they may be able to buy recreationally without a wait? This wait is not in place for reasons related to health, and is an inconsistency built in to Vermont's policy. Another current obstacle is that many people who would benefit from medical cannabis are not being supported by their physicians to fill in the paperwork to get a card. Some physicians appear to be afraid to fill in the paperwork, or have been instructed by their practices not to do this. Some medical practices in the state don't seem to be aware that it's the patient's right to request this treatment. Doctors should be filling in the paperwork when asked. The \$50 annual registration fee is prohibitive for low income people and those living in poverty. It's important that Vermont clear up these problems for the sake of fairness and equity and for best medical practice.

I also must caution legislators not to limit production of edibles for medical purposes. When taken in low doses, edibles are very healthful. In addition, ingesting the plant raw, as in juices or salads, is very good for us, and has little or no psychoactive effects. Investment and focus on the medical benefits of the plant will allow more Vermonters to experience taking non-psychoactive forms such as CBD, CBN, and THCA, all of which are available medically in Colorado. CBN is miraculous for sleep, CBD gets all the headlines for epilepsy treatment, and is also helpful for sleep, appetite and reducing inflammation, and THCA gives you energy as well as relieving pain. The most exciting area for research on cannabis is its effectiveness in treating some forms of cancer, including skin cancers. Herbalists and naturopaths and other alternative medical practitioners as well as caregivers should be encouraged to make tinctures and salves and reduce our reliance on unhealthy pharmaceuticals (you know, the ones that cause death, suicide, strokes, etc). There are no known instances of marijuana overdoses killing people, but the pharmaceutical industry has been getting a pass for way too long. Indeed, the manufacturers of Percoset and Vicodin are some of the primary funders of the movement to squash the legalization of marijuana. Read this article for more information: <http://www.thenation.com/article/anti-pot-lobbys-big-bankroll/>

LEGAL AGE 25

I would also like to see the Vermont legislature do the right thing and set the legal age for recreational cannabis at 25 years of age. This will help prevent a number of health risks. First of all, it will be far less likely for legal recreational product to be available on school campuses, and this will help create a buffer between legal buyers and young people. Young people ought only be able to have the product for medical purposes, such as autism and epilepsy. Another factor in my suggestion for setting the legal age at 25, is that this is the age at which one's brain becomes fully developed. It's important that our laws reflect biology, and be based in science. There is some risk for very small numbers of the population of THC causing psychotic symptoms. These symptoms are most likely

to become evident in the late teen years and early twenties. Setting the legal age at 25 will help to reduce the risk of serious mental health complications. When I went to the forum at the Davis Center at UVM this winter, the primary concerns I heard from those opposed to the legislation were concerns about youth access and concerns about negative mental health outcomes. These valid concerns can best be addressed by setting the legal age for cannabis at 25.

Cannabis must be respected as a medicine. Recreational use may one day help prevent the development of other medical problems, just as a glass of red wine may help some people prevent heart disease. But recreational use cannot be our sole priority this legislative session. Progress can be slower than some might like at this time, because this will ensure that more and more Vermonters will see a friend or family member benefit from healthy cannabis use. At present, the majority Vermonters support legalization of recreational marijuana. First and foremost, cannabis is a medicine, and we need to start realizing how it can help us in small doses, before opening the doors to widespread recreational use.

If Vermont goes ahead with legalization of recreational cannabis in 2016, I would like to see a real commitment on the part of the state to reducing the barriers to medical use for people who need the plant. I would also like to see a significant investment in research and development of products with more subtle, healthful effects (THCA, CBD, CBN). And I would like to make sure that the legal age is 25 to protect brain development until adulthood.

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