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Sound Perspectives

New marijuana law paves way for medical advances

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Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles (D-Seattle) represents the 36th Legislative District. She has served in the state Senate since 1994.

Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles (D-Seattle), Guest Writer

Seventeen years ago, I traveled to Bainbridge Island on weekends to visit my best friend who was dying of cancer. During that time, she suffered greatly and lost a tremendous amount of weight. At the time, I was working on a bill to legalize the use of medical marijuana that eventually became part of Initiative 692 approved by the voters that November.

I was surprised to see how much marijuana helped her. Inhaling a small amount of marijuana smoke would relieve some of her pain, enable her to get some sleep and help her keep down some chicken soup and water. Nowadays, the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes is more common. However, the evidence of marijuana working to help people who are ill remains largely anecdotal.

Yet, my office is flooded with emails containing stories about people who, because they used marijuana, are now able to cope with or overcome severe medical conditions.

Research findings show that not all cannabis is the same. In fact, according to the Seattle biotech firm Verda Bio, there are more than 85 identified cannabinoids known to target receptors throughout the body. Many of these reside within the brain that can be combined in over a billion different ways in a single cannabis plant. The federal government just recently loosened restrictions on medical marijuana research.

However, the lack of in-depth research leaves it unclear which strains work best for which medical conditions. This means some patients may be using marijuana strains that may not be providing as much benefit as other strains could.

That's one reason why I sponsored Senate Bill 5121, bipartisan legislation to create a license for the production and possession of marijuana for research purposes.

I also sponsored this bill to positively reshape Washington's young marijuana industry. While the main focus in the Legislature this year — following passage of legislation aligning the recreational and medical markets — has been on how to spend assumed tax revenue, this new law has the potential to make Washington a national leader in marijuana research.

Prohibition of marijuana at the federal level has hampered research into the plant's effects. Now that we have legalized marijuana in our state, it makes sense to permit research on all possible uses and applications of marijuana.

My bill will permit licensed researchers to produce and possess marijuana to test chemical potency and composition levels, conduct clinical investigations of marijuana-derived drug products, research the efficacy

and safety of administering marijuana as part of a medical treatment, and perform genomic and agricultural research.

Moreover, a marijuana research licensee may contract with the University of Washington or Washington State University to perform research in conjunction with the university. The Liquor and Cannabis Board will develop rules for the licensing of research projects and the approval process by the Life Sciences Discovery Fund.

Testing marijuana products will ensure that products used by vulnerable individuals and patients are safe and free of impurities and dangerous pesticides. Additionally, further research of the plant will assist health care providers identify the most appropriate ways to treat different symptoms and illnesses with marijuana.

Jessica Tonani, the CEO of Verda Bio, has stated that patients of medical marijuana are essentially playing a game of Russian roulette. “Imagine,” she said, “if you had an infection and your doctor told you to go your pharmacy only to be greeted by a pharmacist who directed you toward an aisle of unlabeled medicine bottles and told you to take your pick.”

It’s a game of luck. Some patients are lucky, others are not.

I am hopeful that this new law will result in collaboration among researchers in ways that have not before been legally possible. Such efforts could result in a cascade of discoveries allowing us to benefit from peer-reviewed research findings on marijuana’s benefits and harms.

Soon, patients won’t need to hope to get lucky. With research, we can get them the medical marijuana that works best for their medical condition.

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