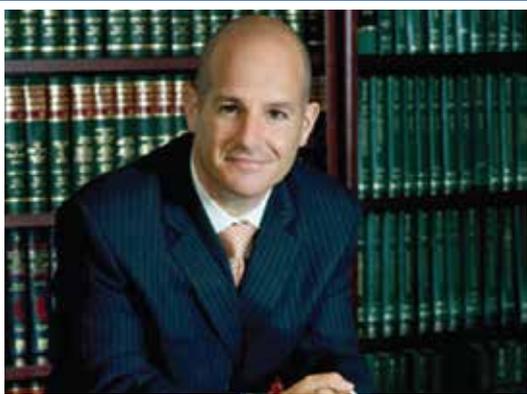


Despite possible legalization in N.J., medical marijuana should be expanded, protected

By *Star-Ledger* Guest Columnist Joshua S. Bauchner



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Writing in the *Star-Ledger/NJ.COM*, Ansell Grimm & Aaron Partner Joshua S. Bauchner urges the Garden State to take the opportunity to change the landscape of medical marijuana and create one of the most comprehensive, deliberate, and successful programs in the nation.

With State Senate President Stephen Sweeney setting Oct. 29 for the state Senate to vote on legalizing recreational marijuana, it seems New Jersey is closer to becoming the next state where cannabis is legal.

Meanwhile, the Garden State has the chance to change the landscape of medical marijuana -- taking lessons from the success and failures of states out west -- and is on the verge of creating one of the most comprehensive, deliberate, and successful programs in the nation.

This effort should proceed without delay.

The importance and benefits are replete. Indeed, as the opioid crisis continues to devastate families across the country subjecting entire communities to constant and horrific loss -- by some estimates more than 200 people die from an overdose *every day* -- the substitution of cannabis as pain relief medication alone will save thousands of lives in the State of New Jersey.

Rather than treating pain with a synthetic, highly addictive pharmaceutical, medical professionals in New Jersey can instead treat patients with a 100 percent all natural, non-addictive, plant-based medicine.

The choice is obvious.

And, for the avoidance of any doubt, there is not a single, recorded incident of anyone, anywhere, ever overdosing on marijuana.

In addition to the patent medical benefits, the medical programs also promote local, small business, jobs, and increased tax revenue -- by some estimates an additional \$300 million, including approximately \$125 million saved on law enforcement costs alone.

Further, the corresponding decriminalization of marijuana ensures that minority communities which for years have been targeted for low-level drug offenses will be free of this stigma as proposed legislation also provides for the expungement of these convictions.

While there is limited opposition, it often is predicated on concerns that minors will obtain access (other than pediatric patients whose lives have been changed through cannabis). In fact, the state has been diligent in ensuring that facilities operate outside of Drug Free School Zones, with minimum distances of 1,000 feet from schools, and 500 feet from playgrounds, parks, and public buildings.

These protective measures, in addition to requiring every patient to have a medical license with their photograph, secure against minors obtaining access to ATCs.

As medical marijuana becomes more readily available, it disrupts the black market where minors and others can purchase cannabis without any lawful controls.

With that above in mind, two concurrent, efforts are under way -- one by executive order issued in March and a second by legislation introduced in June -- to respond to dramatically increased patient demand.

Gov. Phil Murphy seeks to locate two medicinal marijuana facilities each in northern, central and southern regions of New Jersey. The incredible demand for medical marijuana in New Jersey is far exceeding supply -- more than 10,000 new patients have registered for the program which now has over 30,000 members throughout the state, plus 1,000 registered caregivers, and 700 participating physicians

The need for additional access to medical marijuana is supported by voters who are increasingly finding comfort with the program. A recent Quinnipiac poll that shows New Jersey voters support legalization by an astounding 62 percent, up from 59 percent just months ago.

New Jersey Department of Health Commissioner Shereef Elnahal also is working to expand physician participation in the program having conducted two grand rounds lectures with 300 physicians at teaching hospitals to dispel myths and reduce stigma in the medical community.

Although more than 100 new doctors have signed up since the expansion began, only approximately 700 of the 28,000 licensed physicians in New Jersey are currently registered to participate in the Department of Health's Medicinal Marijuana program.

In addition to this expansion effort promulgated by the March executive order, a revised medical marijuana bill was introduced in the State senate in early June of this year. The bill anticipates issuance of up to a total of 15 medical marijuana cultivator permits, up to a total of 15 medical marijuana processor permits, and up to a total of 98 medical marijuana dispensary permits.

Unlike the current expansion program which locates facilities by region, the medical bill sites ATCs by legislative district, with the goal of one dispensary in each of the 40 districts. The bill also eliminates physician registration permitting any health care practitioner who is authorized under State and federal law to prescribe controlled dangerous substances to authorize patients for medical marijuana, including physicians, physician assistants, and advanced practice nurses.

Importantly, moreover, the bill permits reciprocity allowing qualifying patients and designated caregivers who are registered with a medical marijuana program in another state to be deemed to be qualifying in New Jersey.

These efforts place New Jersey in the vanguard of the cannabis industry on the east coast.

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