

Testimony before
The Senate Law and Justice Committee
January 28, 2014

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

Thank you; I appreciate this opportunity to address the committee concerning this Act. In some ways this is one of the stranger days in my career. You see just moments ago I was testifying on the house side in support of Resolution 544. The resolution requests the Attorney General to form a study committee concerning the increasing epidemic of opioid prescription overdoses and deaths in Pennsylvania. At present, there are more people dying of prescription drug overdose than cocaine and heroin combined.

So here I sit moments later in a Senate hearing supporting an Act to legalize and control the medical use of cannabis. To some who have not looked at the data of these two issues, nor have considered the societal implications of both issues, my appearance here may seem incongruous; but I assure it is not.

First, I would like to say that the media and many activists for the legalization of marijuana would want to call this simply a “medical marijuana bill”. This connotes a step towards general use of marijuana. It carries with it the fear of widespread use of marijuana, not for the purposes of medical therapy but rather the simple desire to alter one’s consciousness. I do not endorse the recreational use of marijuana. I do support this act because; I believe cannabis has proven through research, which you will see today, to have great potential in medicinal and analgesic therapies.

The testimonies here today will explore the role of cannabis in aiding in therapies for both type 1 and type 2 diabetes. They will also explore other roles that cannabis can play in pain management and countering the effects of chemotherapy. With advancements in nanotechnology we now have safer modalities for the medical use of cannabinoids. More research should be done in this area.

There is also a civil issue to think about. If new and proven therapies are coming to the forefront due to research and development in the area of cannabinoids, should the government deny therapy for its citizen simply because of the past and present abuse of cannabis for recreational use? I think that denying patients and parents the latest therapies using cannabis is not a proper role of government. I do believe that regulating the prescribing and distribution of medical cannabis is the role of the State and that medical cannabis should be strictly controlled.

One might ask; why is a coroner testifying? He certifies the dead. He is neither a physician nor a molecular biologist. I am a medical legal death investigator. I have been Coroner of Dauphin County since 1990. Over that period I have certified approximately over 12000 deaths. During this entire period I have never had a death do to cannabis toxicity. This is not to say I don't believe abusive use of cannabis is not harmful, both to the mind and the body; I do. This brings me back to today's paradox. On one hand I warn against the use of already legal opioid medications and at the same time I encourage the use a cannabis for medical therapies. Do I think with even this strictly written act, abuses will not take place? No, I do think there will be abuses just like those with pharmaceutical opioids but

enforcement mechanism are in place. We must remember the potential for permanent harm or death is much higher with opioid therapy than with cannabis therapies. Simply stated cannabis is less toxic than many prescribed medications yet at this point we are denying medical cannabis to individuals who seek the phytochemicals in cannabis for good reasons. It seems to me that this is illogical and contrary to available data.

Last year I was asked to speak on a panel concerning a medical cannabis bill that was languishing in the House. When the announcement hit the papers indicating my position in favor of the bill, I was besieged with phone calls. These calls were not from tie-dyed hippies wanting the next high. They were pleadings from parents who had children with serious seizure disorders; cancer patients seeking pain control or help during extensive chemotherapy. What I first thought was an issue of the correct role of government turned into an understanding that these individuals have every right to seek these types of therapies without being branded criminals.

I do support this act. I would request that it be as tight as possible, with the inclusion of formulating best practices for prescribing. I would also like to see if some sort of funding source could be linked to the act that would be dedicated to funding research in the medical use of cannabis. We must separate the two issues and act with reason, not emotion. The medical use of cannabis should not be stayed by the reputation of marijuana's abuse. Thank You.