Historic New Bipartisan Medical Cannabis Bills in Congress

Congress took an historic step last month with the introduction of comprehensive bipartisan medical cannabis legislation in both houses.

On March 10, Senators Rand Paul (R-KY), Cory Booker (D-NJ), and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced the Compassionate Access, Research Expansion, and Respect States (CARERS) Act (S. 683). A bipartisan companion bill (HR 1583) was introduced in the House on March 24 by Representatives Steve Cohen (D-TN-9) and Don Young (R-AK).

If enacted, the sweeping new legislation would amend the Controlled Substances Act to explicitly allow states to set their own medical cannabis policies without violating federal law. The bill would also change federal law to allow banks to provide financial services to licensed medical cannabis businesses, allow Veteran Affairs physicians to recommend medical cannabis to their patients, and enable the research cannabis. 

In addition, the CARERS Act would reclassify marijuana from its current Schedule I status as a highly dangerous drug with no medical value to Schedule II, recognizing it as a medicine, as well as removing bureaucratic barriers to research and allowing for more production of research cannabis.

“Time has come for the federal government to stop impeding the doctor-patient relationship in states that have decided their own medical marijuana policies,” said Senator Dean Heller (R-NV), who has signed on as a fourth sponsor. “This bipartisan legislation puts Americans who are suffering first.”

The CARERS Act is endorsed by several advocacy groups, including Americans for Safe Access (ASA), which helped the Senate authors develop the legislation.

Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia have adopted medical marijuana laws. Another 13 states have adopted laws allowing for the consumption of cannabis extracts that are primarily CBD, a non-psychoactive component of the plant that has been used to treat seizures and other maladies.

Currently, a one-year budget amendment prohibits the Department of Justice from interfering in the implementation of state medical cannabis laws, but the DOJ continues to prosecute individuals and pursue forfeiture cases.

ASA Conference Draws Advocates to DC

Three hundred patients, advocates, and other stakeholders from 40 states and several foreign countries were part of ASA’s third annual National Medical Cannabis Unity Conference and Lobby Day in Washington, DC, at the end of March.

Dozens of panelists, speakers, and trainers participated in panels on new federal legislation, product safety, discrimination, and emerging science. Distinguished researcher Dr. Ethan Russo gave an insightful keynote address on controversies in the field of medical cannabis, and the crowd gave an enthusiastic reception to Alice O’Leary-Randall, the widow of pioneering medical cannabis patient Robert Randall. Pennsylvania state Senator Mike Folmer was a special guest.

Grammy-winner and medical cannabis patient Melissa Etheridge made a video appearance, as did Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Representatives Sam Farr (D-CA) and Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA).

The conference also offered a comprehensive lineup of educational opportunities. Medical professionals got Continuing Medical Education credit for training on the emerging science and clinical applications for medical cannabis. Advocates and industry workers had a special chance to participate in new enrichment courses from ASA’s industry-leading Patient Focused Certification program, as well as the Core Cannabis Curriculum from Cannabis Training Institute.

Following the conference, Americans for Safe Access held its third annual medical marijuana patient citizen lobby day on Capitol Hill in support of the Compassionate Access, Research and Education credit for training on the emerging science and clinical applications for medical cannabis.

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GEORGIA ENACTS LIMITED MEDICAL CANNABIS LAW

With the passage of HB1 in Georgia, the state became the 36th with some form of medical cannabis protections. The act was approved by both the Georgia House and Senate at the end of March and was swiftly signed by Gov. Nathan Deal.

While the new law does provide legal protections for possession and use for therapeutic purposes by patients, there is no legal means for patients to purchase or grow their own medicine. Georgia patients must travel out of state to acquire their medicine, limiting access to faraway places such as Colorado or Maine.

Under HB1, patients are not allowed to inhale cannabis either through combustion or vaporization and may not possess or use cannabis with more than 5% THC. The law provides for eight qualifying conditions: cancer, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), multiple sclerosis, Crohn’s disease, mitochondrial disease, Parkinson’s, and sickle cell disease.
Medical cannabis patients from 13 countries established the International Medical Cannabis Patient Coalition (IMCPC) last month while at a conference in Prague. IMCPC member countries include Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom, and the United States, represented by ASA's executive director.

The first action of the IMCPC was to ratify a declaration urging the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs to reclassify cannabis for medical use, convene a UN Special Convention on Cannabis, or simply exclude cannabis from the UN Single Convention on Narcotics. The IMCPC declaration was delivered to the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna by Pavel Bem, the Czech representative for the Global Commission on Drug Policy.

"The UN policy on cannabis is outdated and at odds with its mission concerning human rights and the right to adequate health care," said IMCPC co-founder, ASA's Steph Sherer. "Three decades of modern scientific studies affirm the therapeutic value of cannabis and should form the basis of international and domestic policies."

The current UN classification of cannabis was established in 1961 with the UN Single Convention on Narcotics. Medical cannabis treatments remain unavailable in most countries, in part because of the UN's stance.

**EXCELLENCE AWARDS RECOGNIZE ACHIEVEMENTS**

A banquet honoring Americans for Safe Access Excellence Award winners was held on the last night of the conference in Washington, DC.

**Elected Officials of the Year:** Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Representatives Sam Farr (D-CA) and Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA)

**Journalist of the Year:** Steven Nelson, U.S. News & World Report

**Researcher of the Year:** Sue Sisley, M.D.

**Patient Advocate of the Year:** Joe Elford

**Hergenrather, M.D.**

**Medical Professional of the Year Award:** Jeff Hergenrather, M.D.

**Patient Partnership Award:** Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps

**ASA Chapter of the Year:** Safe Access Virginia

**Action Group of the Year:** Pennsylvania Campaign for Compassion

**Patient Lobbyist of the Year:** Larry Harvey

**Patient Partnership Award:** Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps

**Medical Professional of the Year Award:** Jeff Hergenrather, M.D.

**2015 Courage Award:** Gail Rand

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Expansion and Respect States (CARERS) Act. Over 250 patients, caregivers, and researchers from 38 states met with the offices of their federal elected officials to discuss safe and legal access to medical marijuana.

- **Citizen lobbyists visited Congressional offices**

After gathering for a group photo on the west side of the Capitol, the citizen lobbyists took to the halls of the Senate and House office buildings, meeting with the legislative staffers who work on medical cannabis issues for their elected officials.

The Lobby Day attendees also dropped off fact sheets or had quick meetings with the offices of Congressional Districts that did not have a constituent present, so all offices heard the patient perspective.

In conjunction with the Lobby Day, ASA also held its third annual Congressional briefing on medical cannabis, this year hosted by Senators Booker, Paul, and Gillibrand. This was the first time ASA's briefing was held on the Senate side, and the approximately 60 Congressional staffers in attendance was about double the number who attended last year's briefing.

Staffers heard expert opinions and experiences on each of six areas of the bill, with presentations from Pennsylvania State Senator Mike Folmer, who is co-lead sponsor of that state's pending medical bill, SB 3; John Hudak of the Brookings Institute; and Dr. Sue Sisley, who is beginning a research study of using cannabis in the treatment of PTSD in veterans.

Representing the patient point of view at the briefing were Beth Collins, Virginia-based parent of a pediatric patient and former medical cannabis refugee in Colorado, and Mike Krawitz, president of Veterans for Medical Cannabis Access.