

Science, Meet Cannabis: Could a truce be in sight?

In 1996, California passed the Compassionate Use Act, legalizing the medical use of marijuana. Since then, 37 other states, including RI, have followed suit; only six states continue to fully criminalize it. Many medical doctors still insist that pot is a dangerous gateway drug with no real medical value, but there is growing evidence which is now proving them wrong.

There is no need to convince **Juan Verde**. This educated man has done very well professionally and leads a full, productive life – family and grandchildren, friends and adventures. He has also been living with MS for over 30 years, and he has a deep conviction in the health benefits of cannabis.

“I see marijuana as a gift,” Verde told *Motif*. “I honestly believe that this plant switches on our body’s ability to heal itself.”

Today, there is scientific research which supports this theory. Humans have been using cannabis for medical purposes for over 5,000 years; science finally caught up in the early 1990’s, when the endocannabinoid system (ECS) was discovered. Studies revealed that it plays a major role in regulating sleep, mood, appetite, memory, reproduction and fertility.

Exactly what is the ECS? It is a vast network of cellular receptors and chemical signals that occur throughout our brains and bodies. Even non-cannabis users have them. In fact, the cannabinoid receptors in our brains far outnumber many of the other receptor types, and they control the levels and activity of most of the other neurotransmitters. This discovery piqued the interest of researchers – for therein lies tremendous medical potential for new ways of treating conditions which are resistant to pharmaceutical and surgical methods.

Verde was in CA when the first laws were passed allowing medical marijuana. “It was because of AIDS,” he told us. Doctors noticed that this plant could help patients who were wasting away; this realization opened the door to a new world of medical possibilities.

In CA, a patient can walk into a compassion center and get a consultation, individualized recommendation, physician’s referral and medical license for only \$25. In RI, the same service costs \$250 if your own doctor won’t do it. The reason? Recreational marijuana is still not legal here, whereas in CA, cannabis is a thriving and fully legal industry.

Verde was first diagnosed with MS when in his 30’s. Initially, he tried to follow the medical treatments his doctor prescribed. He injected himself three times daily with Rebif, but the day after every injection he felt awful – it left him sweating, nauseous and tired, and the injection sites developed inflammation. Over time, the symptoms persisted, but the doctor insisted that these were just normal side effects. Finally, Verde asked “So, what is this drug doing for me, exactly?” When his doctor admitted it might only slow the progression of the disease, Verde considered the \$400 a month it was costing him and the damage they’d advised it could do to his kidneys – and he made a decision. He returned to self-medicating with cannabis and has never regretted it.

Has Verde ever tried the medically approved synthetic form of THC, Marinol? He said that he got a

prescription when he had to travel to India for some time on business and didn't want to risk taking cannabis. Did it work? "It just kind of made me sick to my stomach," he told us. "I never felt good." Just the co-pay for the bottle of 20 pills was \$300.

By now, the score was settled: cannabis - 2; pharmaceuticals - 0

Verde had been using marijuana for many years, before his diagnosis. Looking back, he also realized he'd had low grade symptoms that came and went years before he knew he had MS. We asked if he thought he had been using cannabis medically all along. Verde said, "I don't think there's a difference. I think that if you're using it as an adult, then you're probably using it medically. It works for you in some way. It's beneficial ... or you wouldn't do it." He readily acknowledges that there are people who just like to get high. But over the years, he has noticed a distinct trend: "Most of my friends who used to smoke just naturally tapered off their usage over the years. If you don't need it, your body doesn't want it."

Today, Verde's health is holding steady, as is his quality of life. He is an avid musician, he travels, enjoys social events, and is generous with both his time and resources. "I feel my entire point of being on the earth is to help connect and support other people," he told us. We asked where he thought he'd be if he had stayed on his doctor's program. Verde laughed. "I'm pretty sure I'd be dead from kidney or liver failure by now."

"Cannabis, for me, has been the best medicine I could possibly have found for MS."