

Sen. Jon Erpenbach tells a very personal story on why he supports Governor Evers' budget proposal to legalize medical marijuana.

MADISON - Over a decade ago, I was introduced to a woman named Jacki Rickert. She wasn't the first person to come into my office advocating for the legalization of medical marijuana, that was Gary Storck, but she made a lasting impression. By the end of the meeting she was in terrible pain. Unable to walk or sit comfortably in a wheelchair, her friends and fellow advocates actually lifted her out the window of my ground floor office into a vehicle waiting to take her home. She was a pioneer in the movement to advance the cause of medical marijuana.



Jacki had been diagnosed with a connective tissue disorder called Ehlers-Danlo Syndrome. At one point, in a tremendous amount of pain, and down to a mere 68 pounds, she discovered that marijuana brought her appetite back and alleviated her pain. Seeing these results, in 1990, in Mondovi, WI, a physician wrote a prescription for Jacki to obtain marijuana, and enrolled her in a small federal program allowing its use for medical purposes. The trouble was, she was never able to legally access that medicine, so she and others started an advocacy and awareness campaigned called "Is my Medicine Legal Yet?"

Along the way, politicians from both sides of the aisle have taken up the mantle of medical use. Frank Boyle (D-Phillips) introduced a bill back in 1997, and Republicans like Greg Underheim, (R-Oshkosh) and Rick Skinrud (R-Mt. Horeb) were also among the first to introduce medical marijuana bills. Then- state legislators Tammy Baldwin and Mark Pocan, were also early champions and it was Rep. Pocan who brought me on board in 2007.



When I introduced the first Senate companion with Rep. Pocan in 2009, as Chairman of the Senate Health Committee, we held a public hearing and people from across Wisconsin came to tell their heartbreaking stories. We heard from people with debilitating conditions who had found that opiates and other narcotics prescribed by physicians did little to alleviate their symptoms, and the side effects of those legal drugs were more than they could bear. Marijuana, however, had given them relief. Unfortunately, that is when they had to reluctantly break the law, becoming criminals for trying to obtain the one thing working to help them.



Back then, and even today, there are legislators who are not ready to allow medical marijuana to go forward, giving in to the many myths surrounding marijuana. However, as usual, the public is way ahead of the politicians. Last fall, nearly a million voters in 16 counties and two cities, answered yes on nonbinding referenda asking if marijuana should be legal for medical or recreational use; and in my office the folder of contacts from people who support medical marijuana has grown so large it needs its own drawer in the file cabinet. Nationwide polling from Quinnipiac in the spring of 2018 showed 93% of Americans support medical marijuana and no state that has passed a medical marijuana program has ever repealed it.

Jacki Rickert succumbed to her long illness the day after Christmas in 2017. She did not live long enough to see her medicine become legal. People like Jacki and Gary Storck, and veterans like Steve Acheson and the other members of Wisconsin Veterans for Compassionate Care; they are the reason I have continued to introduce bills to legalize medical marijuana every session since 2009. They are the reason I support Governor Evers' budget proposal and they are the reason I will continue to reach across the aisle and work with my Republican colleagues to get Wisconsin to join the 30 other states who allow their citizens to access marijuana to alleviate conditions like glaucoma, cancer, ALS, chronic pain, PTSD, and, of course, Ehlers-Danlo.