



Medicinal marijuana: The beginning of the end of the ‘government knows best’ era?

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It’s always fun to witness what happens when society as a whole recognizes that the government has gotten things really wrong for a really long time.

Such an occasion occurred Tuesday when Gov. Phil Murphy signed a bill that greatly loosens the state’s controls on medicinal marijuana.

The bill was named “Jake’s Law” in honor of Jake Honig, a boy from nearby Howell Township who was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2012 and died five years later at the age of 7.

His father, Mike, gave a speech in which he pointed out what can only be called the abject stupidity of government. Even though his parents found that marijuana eased the boy’s symptoms, the standard treatment called for him to be given opioids.

“They wanted to give us a gallon of morphine and more Oxycontin than anyone should ever possess,” Mike said in remarks prior to the signing.

But those opioids did more harm than good, he said.

“When he was on morphine, he would have side effects,” Honig said. “He couldn’t sleep and he couldn’t even look at food. But every time we would go to marijuana, he was able to eat, he was able to sleep and most of all he was able to laugh again.”

But under the old law, the family could get no more than 2 ounces of medicinal cannabis a month. “Our biggest obstacle was running out of medicine, something that no parent should ever have to endure,” he said.

The new law permits the purchase of 3 ounces per month and removes the limits entirely for those who are terminally ill.

It does a whole lot more than that, however.

The governor and the other speakers kept their focus on those with serious diseases who find that marijuana makes them feel better.

But this law will benefit a whole lot of people who just want feel better, period — or “period, full stop” as the governor likes to say.

I thought of that as I looked around the bar-restaurant in Freehold where the event was held, Tommy's Tavern and Tap. It was held there because the owners were so helpful in the Honigs' efforts to get Jake's Law enacted.

But once this bill takes full effect and the new distributorships are set up, it will be legal for the holder of a medicinal marijuana card to light up outside a bar, assuming the management permits it. This one had a pleasant outdoor section that would be ideal for those who like some THC with their IPA.

I have friends who managed to do so even under the old law, which made it difficult to get a cannabis card. Under the new law, the range of qualifying conditions has been extended to include "anxiety."

That's a term that could be interpreted to let a lot of people have access to cannabis.

Full, recreational legalization couldn't get through the Legislature. It will have to wait until a planned referendum next year. But this approach certainly represents a move toward legalization.

The number of dispensaries will increase from 12 to as many as 120, and if you care to get a card, you're legal. If you're a baby boomer, you can get that card at the senior rate of just \$20.

Under the old law you needed a physician to prescribe the pot, but under the new law it can be prescribed by physician assistants and advanced practicing nurses as well.

But the best thing about the law is that it represents a repudiation of the "government knows best" approach. Cannabis remains illegal on the federal level. But all over the country, state lawmakers have ignored the feds and set up their own systems.

It's interesting that most of those pushing the change seem to be liberals. But the healthy distaste they have for the federal government is traditionally the province of the conservative side. Some are hypocritical on this issue, but libertarians such as the fellows at the Cato Institute have been among those pushing the hardest for legalization.

There's also room for a left-right coalition on the issue of foreign affairs. As with marijuana, 20 years ago the great mass of Americans were content to follow Washington's lead when it comes to military interventions.

Then in 2016 Donald Trump shocked the Republican establishment by pointing out the fact — obvious to voters if not to politicians — that presidents of both parties spent the 21st century making a mess of military affairs in the Mideast.

Whoever runs for president on the Democratic ballot in 2020 is likely to try to out-Trump Trump in criticizing those bungled efforts.

When it comes to trusting the government to sort things out, it looks like we are moving toward the end of an era — the sooner the better.