

Bill Kaplan: Yes and no on marijuana

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Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony (“the Tiger”) Evers ran in part on reforming state marijuana laws. Evers has now put forward reform initiatives as part of his proposed budget. I agree wholeheartedly with his sensible proposals regarding the criminal justice system, support legalizing medical marijuana and applaud Evers’ steering clear of legalizing recreational use of marijuana.

In his budget address Evers said: “our budget will decriminalize marijuana possession for 25 grams or less.” He has also called for an “expungement (erasing) procedure for individuals who have completed their sentence or probation for possession ...”. This approach has been endorsed by the American Medical Association (AMA) which has called for “public health based strategies” rather than fixating on incarceration. In March, the Medical Societies of Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey and New York agreed, while opposing legalization.

Reforming the criminal justice system on “marijuana-related crimes” (6 percent of state inmates) will reduce prison populations and racial disparities (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel). However, GOP legislative leaders have signaled scorched-earth opposition. They should instead listen to former Wisconsin GOP Governor Tommy Thompson: “We lock up too many people for too long. It’s about time we change the dynamics. I apologize for that.” An honest conservative.

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Evers, a cancer survivor, also wants to legalize medical marijuana. He said: “I know the side effects of a major illness can make everyday tasks a challenge. People shouldn’t be treated as criminals for accessing (marijuana)... .” Evers spelled out the details: “Under the ... proposal, a physician ... can recommend the use of

medical marijuana to alleviate symptoms related to medical conditions such as cancer, glaucoma, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, severe nausea and seizures.” Users would need a state-issued ID and would be prohibited from driving or using machinery “under the influence” (Wisconsin State Journal). I support strictly on humanitarian grounds. Why?

There is very little evidence-based research on medical marijuana. “Because the federal government considers marijuana a Schedule I drug, research on marijuana or its active ingredients is highly restricted and even discouraged in some cases. ... Without clear answers (on the efficacy of medical marijuana) hospitals, doctors and patients are left to their own devices, which can result in poor treatment and needless suffering” (Kaiser Health News). The AMA, Wisconsin Medical Society and National Academy of Medicine support research (which should examine marijuana commonly used).

All of the above leads to the elephant in the room – full legalization of marijuana, of which Evers wisely steers clear. Recent articles from the Annals of Internal Medicine, Journal of the American Medical Association and Lancet Psychiatry highlight physiological and psychiatric dangers of using marijuana. Doctor Gail D’Onofrio, Professor and Chair of Emergency Medicine, Yale University School of Medicine, summarized some of the findings: “The harmful effects of marijuana, including impairment of judgment, driving ability and precipitating psychosis in adolescents far exceed its benefits. States should not balance their budgets (taxing marijuana) by jeopardizing the health of the public.”

Yes on criminal justice reforms and medical marijuana, no on full legalization.

– Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.