Learning the Health Benefits of Cannabis

State-by-state legalization of marijuana is opening eyes to the possible health benefits from parts of the cannabis plant, but the federal government remains an obstacle, as Martin A. Lee explained to Dennis J Bernstein by Dennis J Bernstein

Despite breakthroughs in understanding the curative possibilities of CBD – essentially the non-psychoactive part of the cannabis plant – the stigma of marijuana’s criminalization is delaying progress as is the refusal of the federal government to support state-by-state legalization.

I spoke with Martin A. Lee, the director of Project CBD and a leading expert on the breakthroughs and breakdowns when it comes to the use of CBD as a healing tool on April 20, 2017. Lee is also the author of Smoke Signals: A Social History of Marijuana – Medical, Recreational, and Scientific

Dennis Bernstein: Okay. Well, let’s just start with a sweeping overview. Trump is in. We’ve got an extremely right-wing attorney general. On the macro level do you anticipate... is there a sense that the landscape is changing?

Martin Lee: No one really knows what lays ahead. Obviously, the uncertainty coming from the federal government is problematic for the “cannabis industry” – we used to call it a community, now it’s an industry.

But there are also countervailing forces. You know, Trump’s folks have talked about coming down on the recreational market, as opposed to medical. They seem to be conceding medical. But there are countervailing forces particularly with respect to the CBD industry. CBD, cannabinoid, as you are mentioning, is basically a non-psychoactive component of the cannabis plant with a lot of therapeutic applications.

So, whereas there’s concerns about the pharmaceuticalization of CBD, once it is approved as an isolated pharmaceutical, and soon it will be by the federal government, what will happen to the so-called grassroots hemp industry... CBD oils are derived from hemp. This is all over the place, online. And there is significant political support for an indigenous hemp industry in the United States, coming particularly from the Kentucky senator’s. Mitch McConnell, of course, is a very powerful senator, Majority Leader in the Senate, representing Kentucky, a hemp growing state. So, how this is all getting played out, who’s going to control it, how it will be regulated remains to be seen, because of all these different variables. It’s hard to predict.

DB: And, in that context, there is some major confusion. Some people are being
busted, some people are having their stuff taken. Talk about… there’s been a number of raids all over the country in the context of hemp and CBD. Talk about what’s been going on in Alaska.

ML: Well, just in general, before Alaska, there’s been an idea promoted by businesses online that CBD, cannabinoid, is legal in all 50 states, which is not true according to the federal government. And there’s been a lot of confusion both… really on the state level, also, how this compound and these products made with this compound, will be regulated. Some states have not legalized medical marijuana, but have legalized the CBD, just one compound in the plant. Sounds a little crazy but there’s now 15 states without medical marijuana laws where, technically speaking, CBD is legal.

And this has given people an idea that they can just access this stuff from the wholesalers, CBD oil, and hang a shingle, so-to-speak, and start selling it. Well, some folks who have done that in various states are in for a rude surprise. In Alaska, a state where marijuana is legal for adults, as well as for medical use, there have been raids of all the medical marijuana facilities that are providing CBD products, on the grounds that they weren’t being produced, these products, within the state of Alaska.

Most medical marijuana states stipulate the product has to be grown and produced and sold and consumed within that state. And since these CBD hemp oil products are coming from all over, from Europe, from Colorado, from Kentucky, not from Alaska that was the reason why there were a series of raids, I think it was seven in total, dispensaries were hit as part of the same drag net, in February, in Alaska.

And there’s been half a dozen other states where there have been some sporadic raids like this. I don’t think this is a result of a unified policy. I think this is a local law enforcement affair. But it underscores the confusion with respect to the legal status of CBD which is ultimately grounded in the contradictions of prohibition, a policy that doesn’t make any sense at all. It’s built on a mountain of lies, basically.

DB: Perhaps the most interesting, outside of Alaska, in terms of those raids is Kentucky. So, even though the majority leader of the Republican Senate is Mitch McConnell, Kentucky is being hit. It’s an interesting sort of back and forth there.

ML: Yes, again, they’ve been hit, in Princeton, Kentucky, actually, the name of the town, there was a law enforcement raid of a storefront that was selling CBD rich products, oil products. But presumably made in Kentucky, but that store did not have a license to do that. And, again, this idea that’s being promoted by
vested interests that CBD is legal everywhere, and you can just do whatever you want with it. That has sort of collided with the realities and confusion at the local law enforcement level, and the state level as well. In Missouri, the attorney general actually brought an action against a couple of stores that were selling CBD without a proper license.

DB: Marty, let’s turn the focus to… tell people a little bit more about the possibilities of CBD. There have been some breakthroughs, of course, this is difficult because of the federal government’s unwillingness to relent in considering all of this a very dangerous drug. But there has been more and more research, breakthroughs. Tell us about some of the possibilities that we now know exist in terms of the use of CBD.

ML: Well, there’s a huge amount of scientific research that’s been going on now for several decades, focusing on CBD, it’s cannabinoid and other components of the plant. But what’s interesting is that now we’re seeing some reports from doctors, clinicians, in states where there’s a robust medical marijuana program, such as California, who are actually reporting what they’re finding when they’re treating patients, including pediatric epilepsy patients, which has gotten a lot of attention. Little kids with intractable seizure disorders, terrible, where they’re seizing hundreds of times a week.

It so happens, for certain conditions, CBD as a molecule, even as an isolated product, can be very effective depending on what is the underlying breakdown molecularly, so-to-speak, in the brain that leads to these disease disorders. And there could be hundreds of factors that feed into epilepsy. But, what I find really interesting here, is that what these doctors recently reported in a peer reviewed scientific journal, was that the CBD isolate, the high CBD, low THC oils, which are very effective in some cases, are not effective in all cases. In fact, are not effective in most cases. We need to say most cases, there might be a reduction of seizures but not an elimination, as there are in, let’s say, 10 – 15% of these cases.

And what the doctors clearly found was that they have to have an array of different kinds of cannabinoid medicine, different ratios, of CBD and THC, different components of the plant have to be available for the doctor and the patient to test and to figure out ultimately what works for each individual.

And what that really calls into question, in my mind, is the whole pharmaceutical model, where there’s one compound, one ratio, in this case it’s going to be all CBD, and nothing less that’s going to be approved very soon as a legal medicinal tool. But the science and the clinical experience clearly shows while that’s a very, very valuable medical instrument (the pure CBD), what you really need is some options available from the whole plant. And without that you
have a very, very limited possibility of helping people out.

DB: So, what you’re saying is there is an important synergy between the non-psychoactive and the psychoactive and that it’s a formula, it would be, I guess, a prescription from the pharmacy in terms of what are you dealing with, what is the makeup and the breakdown of...adding one or the other to accommodate each case?

ML: Yeah. So it really goes back to old style medicine. And it’s happening today in the sense that...it’s not many physicians who are doing this, but some can take out their pad and write a recommendation, because technically a prescription is not allowed from what is still a schedule 1 substance, an illegal substance. And they can tell you what ratios THC and CBD should be in the oil, what terpenes—the compound that gives a particular smell to the plant—and many different combinations, thereof. Those terpenes also have significant medical effects. They’ve found that in some cases of epilepsy if there are certain terpenes present that the compounds that smell like lemon or lavender, respectively called limonene and linalool. When these are present in the oil that has a great accentuating effect in terms of an anti-seizure property.

So, all these things are being discussed, explored and discovered. And it’s very, very exciting. And it’s tremendous potential I think for medical science, and practical medicine, and ultimately to reduce the costs of health care. It’s that dimension, I think, that is not being discussed, but I think that’s kind of the elephant in the living room. That given the health care crisis we face in this country we should really be taking very seriously the implications of this plant.

DB: Now that is the breakthrough. The breakdown, once again, is law enforcement, isn’t it? It’s been that way for years, in which the research is still being held up by the arcane laws of yesteryear.

ML: Yes, definitely on the federal level, this is true, and it has a huge influence. But things are happening on a state level now. I think the prohibition is so absurd, particularly with respect to medical research, that some states are going their own way. And I think in California what there’s been a noticeable shift to observe is that Sacramento [the state capital] is now behind the industry, as it were. It’s supportive of the industry. Whereas a year ago you couldn’t say that clearly. But there’s clearly been a shift and hopefully that will manifest itself, in part, in allocation of funds for serious research in this area.

DB: Marty, could you take a moment to talk a little bit about the social history, and how the law enforcement and how the criminalization has been a
devastating problem, and which we still face. I mean people are going to be in jail long after the things that put them in jail are legal and sort of helping to float the entire economy of the United States.

ML: Yeah, it is ironic that something that is such a huge economic boon is still penalized, in terms of personal use, although that’s happening less and less. Clearly the history of marijuana prohibition as an instrument of social control by the government is quite significant.

And we’ve seen that clearly in terms of the arrest statistics, the disproportionate targeting, arrests, persecution, if you will, of young people, particularly people of color, that continues. But, even more than that, and that’s quite enough to be opposed to this prohibition, carte blanche, but it’s not just different segments of society, specific segments of society that have suffered; Everybody has, in terms of the impeding of important medical research. So this is something in many, many different ways that has really hurt society because of the laws have been a convenient instrument to “keep people in their place.”

DB: Are you aware, Marty, that according to the New York Times of April 15th you now live in America’s cannabis bucket?

ML: Yes, I was aware of that. And the triangle, this is the cannabis bud feast in the United States. It’s been such historically since the early 1970’s. And it’s part of that, the region that includes the [S.F.] Bay Area. Yeah, you could say it’s the cannabis capital of the United States. But, really the whole cannabis phenomenon and there’s been a huge pro-cannabis cultural shift socially and culturally. This is now a nation-wide phenomenon. It’s not just California, or Colorado or Washington anymore.

DB: And so, Marty, coming up is 420 [April 20], what does 420 mean in the world of marijuana? And what will you be doing on 420?

ML: Well, April 20th has become kind of a national cannabis holiday, if you will. In my mind, it’s sort of part of a rite of spring that also involves so-called bicycle day, that’s a day in which Dr. Albert Hofmann discovered the effects of LSD in the 1940’s, and Earth Day. And 420 altogether seem to be, like I say, an annual rite of spring to certain elements in our community. And this 420 I’ll be at Animal Farms, that’s a dispensary up at Hopland at the Solar Living Center, with the Real Goods Store, 12 acre permaculture oasis, we described. They’re having an all day party. Everybody is invited. I think a lot of people are going to be there. We’ll have a speaker’s circle, music, food, a whole array of things.
DB: I don’t want to go out, I don’t want to be a bummer. I just want to give folks who are using marijuana in various ways who are going to dispensaries, what is your recommendation to people ... in terms of being careful? Should they be frightened now of vape oil, of using these vapes? How does one be cautious in the age, in the 21st century, in the age of marijuana?

ML: Well, I think there are really three challenges, three big problems facing the consumer now. One is just the lack of adequate labeling on the products. Also, the pesticide residues, and there’s a lot of products tainted with pesticides in the cannabis area. And it’s a very significant problem. We’re actually working on this issue now, Project CBD.

But then, as you point out, the issue of vape pens. The problem is with these vape oils, oftentimes they’re cut with thinning agents. And some to watch out for that are apparently legal to include in these things but particularly potentially dangerous, very dangerous: propylene glycol and polyethylene glycol, if you see this on any of the marketing collateral for these vape oils, avoid those. Because when heated and inhaled, those particular compounds, propylene glycol and polyethylene glycol, turn into carcinogens, and can cause cancer. And it’s terrible, but it’s trouble in these vape pen oils. It’s not impossible to find some good ones. But we have seen, when we looked at those, vape oils, made from the hemp derived CBD, we haven’t found one yet that hasn’t been tainted by these toxic thinning agents. And these are products that are directly used for medical patients. You wouldn’t use a vape oil pen with high concentration of CBD for recreational purposes.

But also, just in general, e-cigarettes, tobacco cigarettes have this propylene glycol in it, and I just fear we’re going to have a terrible day of reckoning, when these aren’t regulated. Unfortunately these things are regulated as being safe for oral consumption.

But they’ve never really been tested for heating and inhalation. And now there’s scientific reports that are coming in, not tested by the government, incidentally, but by individual scientists are quite ominous. So it’s something to avoid.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.