

In a move that should expand scientific research efforts into the medical benefits of cannabis, on September 9th, the U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee sent new marijuana-related legislation to the House floor for further debate and consideration. [H.R. 3797](#), labeled “The Medical Marijuana Research Act of 2019,” would permit certified scientists to carry out a wide range of tests on medicinal cannabis products obtained from state-licensed dispensaries.

In addition to sanctioning the use of cannabis from state-approved dispensaries, H.R. 3797 will also modify existing regulations to make it easier for research scientists to study cannabis in a timely, efficient, and affordable manner. The new law will lower approval times for proposed tests, simplify the review process for cannabis study protocols, and reduce burdensome security costs that have prevented testing labs from working with cannabis in the past.

H.R. 3797 is not the first legislation to address inequities in cannabis research. In July, the House approved [a separate measure](#) that would allow scientists in all 50 states to access cannabis supplies for research, regardless of the legality of cannabis in their locations.

Currently, medical researchers interested in studying cannabis must obtain their supplies from government-approved sources, which strictly grow the product for research.

Inside the Evolving Politics of Cannabis

At present, the only facility authorized by the federal government to grow cannabis for these purposes is at the University of Mississippi, and researchers have expressed dissatisfaction with this source. The cannabis grown there lacks a broad-spectrum chemical profile and is quite similar to hemp in its overall chemical makeup. Researchers have repeatedly complained about the quality of this cannabis, noting that proper study is impossible when the cannabis being analyzed is different from that used by actual medical patients.

The original motivation behind H.R. 3797 was to increase the number of government-approved manufacturers licensed to supply cannabis to researchers. But at the last minute, an amendment was added that allows scientists to acquire medicinal-grade cannabis products from state-approved dispensaries if they have a proven track record of quality control and good customer service. This addition should streamline the process considerably since existing dispensaries can theoretically start supplying scientists with medicinal cannabis products immediately (once the bill is passed and signed into law by the President).

The lead co-sponsors of H.R. 3797 are an unlikely duo—Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) supports the legalization of adult-use marijuana at the federal level, and Rep. Andy Harris (R-MD), a recreational marijuana prohibitionist who remains somewhat skeptical about the actual benefits of medicinal cannabis.

“We may come from different sides of the issues, but we can agree on one thing,” Blumenauer and Harris co-wrote in [an editorial explaining their alliance](#). “The federal government should not stand in the way of legitimate, scientific medical cannabis research.”

The list of co-sponsors for H.R. 3797, which includes both Democrats and Republicans, is a testament to the evolving nature of public sentiment on cannabis-related issues. According to [the latest polling data](#), a whopping 91 percent of the American people favor the legalization of medicinal cannabis, and that type of response has pulled the rug of legitimacy out from under reactionary anti-cannabis politics.

The majority of Republicans in the U.S. House and Senate are still opposed to the federal legalization of cannabis. But most appear open to letting states decide for themselves whether cannabis should be legalized for either the medical or adult-use markets.

Consequently, whenever H.R. 3797 is officially put up for a vote on the House's floor, it is expected to pass. Nevertheless, Democratic leadership in the House appears content to wait until after the November election to introduce the bill officially. With the latest polls suggesting the Democrats are likely to gain seats in the House and the Senate, the odds of H.R. 3797 passing successfully through both legislative bodies should increase if it isn't voted on before January 2021, when the new Congress will be officially seated.

Both President Trump and Vice President Biden have expressed a willingness to support some progressive legislation on cannabis-related issues. So regardless of the outcome of the Presidential election, an executive veto of H.R. 3797 is unlikely.

The Opposition Melts Away

Up to now, draconian regulatory structures have forced scientists to jump through a series of hoops before receiving approval to study the medicinal properties of cannabis. Besides the unavailability of suitable products, these barriers have hamstrung research and created huge knowledge gaps about cannabis's actual healing capacity. Opponents of legalization have cynically used the lack of comprehensive data as an excuse to question the efficacy of medical marijuana, claiming that American citizens might be put at risk if it were universally legalized.

Irrational attitudes about medical cannabis can be traced primarily to two sources. First, the longstanding habit, fueled by social and religious conservatism and War on Drugs-style hysteria, of grouping cannabis with far more dangerous and addictive illicit substances like cocaine and methamphetamine and heroin. Even though all the scientific data refutes it, this stigmatization of marijuana still influences people's thinking. Old prejudices die hard, and the prejudice against cannabis has been slow to dissipate, despite anecdotal and research-based evidence that verifies its numerous therapeutic benefits.

Pharmaceutical industry truculence is the other obstacle that has held back progress in medicinal cannabis. Multinational drug companies have traditionally perceived cannabis as a threat, and they have used their financial and political clout to suppress the truth about cannabis's medicinal potency. Big Pharma's power has been more on display in Washington, D.C. than in state capitals, where they've relied on lobbying prowess, campaign contributions, and the promise of future employment to squelch progressive federal legislation on medical marijuana.

But the winds of change are in the air, thanks to the public's strong belief in the effectiveness of medical cannabis. Pharmaceutical company opposition is slowly starting to soften, as many drug companies are now working to bring their own cannabis-based medications to market. [More than 100 clinical trials of cannabis](#) were sponsored by pharmaceutical companies in 2018, representing Big Pharma's acknowledgment that the rolling tide of cannabis legalization cannot be stopped.

Meanwhile, recent polling found that just 12 percent of Republicans are opposed to medical marijuana legalization. Knee-jerk conservative obstructionism on this issue is becoming less and less of a factor in political life, and the rapid decline in Republican opposition to medicinal marijuana is a trend that shows no signs of abating.

Free and open research into the medicinal properties of cannabis will undoubtedly reveal fascinating and eye-opening information. Some of the data will confirm anecdotal evidence about medical marijuana's effectiveness, and some of it will demonstrate previously undetected healing capacities. Medical consumers will benefit from these findings the most, as new treatment regimens are developed that prescribe medical marijuana for a broadening range of conditions, disorders, and illnesses.