

My name is Jim Champion. I am a 100% service-connected disabled Army veteran from Illinois. I am proud of my service in the 101st Airborne infantry as well as Old Ironsides in Germany. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis over 27 years ago. When I became a part of the VA system, I volunteered for every experimental procedure, drug, and injection my doctors presented me with hoping I could help those who came after me. To say that I have tried every possible pharmaceutical and treatment for MS over the years would be a gross understatement.

Each time I went to the doctor with new spasms or pain, I'd walk out with a new muscle relaxer, pain pill, or an increase in the drugs I was already taking. By 2003, I found myself taking a cocktail of 59 pills a day and an injection every other day, all of which did little to nothing for the pain and spasms. The side effects, however, were much worse. I rarely got out of my bed or left my house for any activity. I gained nearly 70 pounds in water retention, but rarely had the appetite to eat. My teeth rotted from the inside out and all the pills were making me feel sicker and weaker.

Later that year, I had a muscle spasm in my leg that lasted for days. You could literally see the muscles in my leg dancing and twitching. Nothing I did or took would stop it and a good night's rest was out of the question. It reminded me of when I ran in the Army; the only difference was when you stop running and sit down your legs eventually stop hurting. I was already sitting in a wheelchair, and my leg would not stop.

One night my cousin came over and asked me if I wanted to try cannabis. I was desperate for any sort of relief so I agreed. By the time I finished, not only did the spasms in my leg stop, I felt hungry for the first time in a long time, and I was finally able to sleep that night.

At first, my wife was concerned about me consuming cannabis in addition to all the pills I was taking. But even she was shocked when she saw that my leg had stopped twitching. When I had no spasms, there was little or no pain. Cannabis had provided me unparalleled relief!

After discussing it with her, we took inventory of my pills and began tapering down the ones I no longer needed thanks to the relief provided by one cannabis cigarette a day. While we reduced some pills, we completely eliminated others. I no longer need Xanax for tremors, Gabapentin, methadone, morphine, and Vicodin among many others. In fact, I am currently narcotic free and only take approximately 12 pills a day and no injections for my MS.

While I'm not afforded the same rights as a civilian to freely and openly consult with my VA doctors about my cannabis use, I presented it to them by stating that I am no longer concerned about my quantity of life. At the age of 48, I want to focus on quality of life.

Since that time, I literally feel like a new person. I'm now up in my wheelchair every day. Cannabis has allowed me to maintain a level of activity that I thought had long passed me by. I'm able to once again enjoy sporting events and outings with my family. I currently serve as the veterans' representative on Gov. Rauner's medical cannabis advisory board, and I'm also an advocate for veterans' and patients' rights and medical cannabis in general.

Over the years I have developed fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, and neuropathic pain in addition to my MS, but I still only consume one to two cannabis cigarettes a day. I'm hoping when the dispensaries open in my state that I will be able to find an alternative to consuming cannabis other than smoking it.

I've had doctors ask me if cannabis really works. As an inpatient at Hines VA hospital, I can't have my cannabis, so they substitute Vicodin or stronger. On the commonly used pain scale, my level of pain is a 4-5 at best. It does nothing for the stiffness, tremors, or neuropathic pain (the feeling that your legs and feet are on fire or in a block of ice). I also lose weight because of my lack of appetite.

At home, after consuming a small amount of cannabis, my pain level is a 0-2, and the side effect is that I get hungry.

Finally, I don't like to call cannabis a miracle drug because I feel the term is thrown around too loosely these days. However, NBC's *Dateline* recently aired an episode called "Growing Hope" about the benefits of medical cannabis. It included the story of an oil made from hemp containing very little THC called Charlotte's Web. It was named after a five-year-old girl named Charlotte Figi from Colorado who has a rare form of epilepsy. After none of her seizure meds worked, her doctors were out of ideas. As a last resort, her parents began giving her this oil. She went from having 300 seizures per week to being seizure free. Within two years, she went from being severely debilitated in a wheelchair to walking, talking, and feeding herself. She no longer takes any of her seizure medicines that have horrifying side effects; rather, she takes two spoonfuls of this oil a day. This is just one of many stories about children with epilepsy who have benefited from this oil. Parents from states with no medical cannabis laws are forced to relocate to Colorado to obtain this for their children. These parents have nowhere left to turn.

As the veterans' representative on the governor's advisory board, I've heard first-hand testimony on how cannabis helps people with various debilitating conditions. As an advocate, people have told me how beneficial it is in relieving symptoms brought on by cancer, MS, AIDS, Crohn's disease, and numerous other conditions. Not to mention its effectiveness in treating PTSD, which is attributed to 22 veteran suicides a day. And I certainly know what cannabis has done for me is nothing short of a miracle. The fact that it's a Schedule I narcotic is just plain wrong!

Thank you for holding this hearing. As you look for ways to provide compassionate access to families of children with seizure disorders who absolutely need and deserve cannabis, I hope you won't forget people like me with other conditions. We also need and deserve compassion.

Thank you!!

Jim Champion