

TESTIMONY OF JOANNE M. UNGARSKY
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ON HB 1393 COMPASSIONATE USE ACT OF 2009

Good morning, Chairmen Oliver and Baker, and Members of the Committee. I am Joanne Ungarsky from Huntington Mills, Luzerne County, PA, and I am submitting this testimony to urge passage of HB 1393, the Compassionate Use Act of 2009, by this Committee and the General Assembly.

I am 53 years old, and have worked as a Licensed Practicing Nurse for approximately 30 years. In 2005 I became disabled and lost much of my control of my arms and legs, and experienced extreme pain in many parts of my body. I was diagnosed with Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS), a neurological disorder, and was put on Elavil for the nerve symptoms and Vicoprofin for the pain. Shortly afterwards I went into a deep and painful depression, my whole body hurt and the only thing the Vicoprofin seemed to do was *deepen* my depression. My Neurologist prescribed Cymbalta for me and kept me on it for a long time and even though it seemed to help somewhat with the depression there were other side effects that weren't so pleasant, one of which was the fact that even though I didn't really feel depressed, I often found myself thinking about suicide. I would get an almost irresistible urge to jump in front of a car and would have to force myself not to. I was taken off the Cymbalta completely and that's when it seems all hell broke loose. I got hot flashes almost constantly, my moods went back and forth like crazy, and I would scream at those around me and not even realize I was doing so - my sentences were nothing more than random words thrown together with no coherent meanings - then I would sit and cry for hours at a time.

I had what could only be described as "mind zaps", like large bolts of electricity shooting through my brain, they were painful and frightening, I even thought that perhaps I was going insane. Even those closest to me were afraid to be around me, and those who didn't know me thought I was crazy. Once again my medication was changed and I was given Valium to calm me down when I went nuts. Things only got worse and I was soon taken off the Valium as well. My life had gone completely to hell, those who knew me were afraid for me and those who didn't were afraid of me.

My boyfriend had been studying TOS and its symptoms - as well as Cymbalta and its side effects - and found that the mind zaps were *caused by withdrawal from the Cymbalta*, as were many of my other symptoms such as pain, mood swings, fits of uncontrollable rage, and loss of clarity in thought processes. He also studied several other types of treatment for TOS and depression, and he showed me reports from studies done in several Universities around the country on the medical applications for the

Cannabinoids found in Marijuana. He said that they have found that it can be used to treat many neurological disorders like Multiple Sclerosis, Down's Syndrome, Parkinson's Disease, Alzheimer's Disease, HIV Dementia and even depression, all without any harmful side effects. Even though TOS wasn't listed among the diseases treated with Cannabis, he convinced me that it couldn't hurt to try since it seemed to work for so many other neurological disorders, perhaps it would help me too, nothing could possibly be worse than the pain and confusion I was going through then, not to mention the hell I was putting those around me in.

My doctor said he couldn't recommend using marijuana for treatment, but that if I wanted to try it he wouldn't ask me not to. I obtained a small amount of it and tried smoking it, and I also baked some into cookies that I kept separate from other snacks for my own personal use. I can't say that the effects were immediate, but they were very noticeable to everyone, especially to me. My depression improved greatly and I found myself actually looking forward to the days ahead rather than dreading them. After awhile the mind zaps disappeared, along with them went the pain that had been associated with them. When I talked to people I began to make sense rather than screaming jumbled words. I still have the pain and other symptoms related to TOS, but I have regained much of my control over my arms and legs and the *pain isn't nearly as severe as before*. I know it may seem somewhat dramatic to say it, but I honestly believe that had it not been for the marijuana I would now be either in a mental institute, a nursing home, or a cemetery. Marijuana saved my sanity, if not my life. Now I am left with the difficult choice between continuing with the use of marijuana to control my symptoms and risk going to jail, or to return to the prescription medications that had destroyed my life and possibly even came close to ending it. For me, that choice should be clear, yet the thoughts of being arrested and once again going through the depression that I so recently recovered from is terrifying.

When I heard about HB 1393, I thought, 'This could be the break myself and others like me desperately need.' There are thousands of people right now who are going through the same hell I just went through. People who have been on Cymbalta and other anti-depressants and are now experiencing "mind zaps", mood swings, rage, and repeated thoughts of suicide, and some that are even following through with those thoughts and committing suicide. Much of this could be avoided if we could only have a safe alternative to the dangerous prescription drugs that millions of people are taking every day. Marijuana could supply that safe alternative for many of us, whether it is taken by smoking or ingesting, or the cannabinoids be extracted and administered by other means, there can be no denying that the benefits both medically and mentally are abundant. On behalf of myself and millions of patients everywhere, I urge you to give this Bill serious consideration and to just take a little time and look at the research done, read the findings of studies done around the world on the benefits of

Cannabinoids and whole plant cannabis in medicine, and most importantly, cast off those outdated notions from 1937. Marijuana doesn't make people crazy - it can be used to treat many types of dementia. It doesn't cause cancer - it has been shown to be effective in *treating* cancer patients. Plus, marijuana is the *only* drug on Earth that it is impossible to fatally overdose on as it has been proved to be nontoxic at any dosage.

All of my life I have been taught about the dangers of marijuana. That it causes people to go insane, that it makes violent criminals out of the mildest of people, that it causes cancer and several other diseases, that it is very addictive, and the list of dangerous and even deadly effects of marijuana seemed to go on indefinitely; yet, in all of my 53 years, I have never heard of a single case where any of those things actually happened. Not a single death caused by marijuana, not a single case of cancer attributed to it, not a single person committed to a mental institute because of it. Nothing at all! Even all the claims that it leads to harder drugs seem to be greatly exaggerated. It is well known that the vast majority of auto accidents are caused by alcohol, what isn't so well known is the fact that there are many more accidents caused by people who are unimpaired in any way (perfectly sober and alert) than there are accidents caused by marijuana use. That doesn't mean marijuana makes you a safer driver, but it does seem to indicate that it doesn't really make you a more dangerous driver either.

As a nurse, I often gave medications to patients and watched as they progressively got worse. I saw many of them suffer for months and even years until they were finally relieved by death. Many of those patients could have been spared much of their suffering through the medical use of Cannabinoids. The time has long passed for us finally get rid of the prejudice and fear that has kept this drug illegal for so long. A drug that was made illegal all because of the racial bigotry and ignorance of one man over seventy years ago (Harry J Anslinger), a law that was passed solely on the basis of one lie told on the Senate floor in 1937.

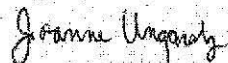
But this isn't 1937, this is 2009, and we all know that none of those things Anslinger claimed 72 years ago are true, none of the horrors he described were ever seen in real life. Think about your own past and what you were taught about marijuana, then think about how many of those bad things you have actually seen, or even heard of happening to real people. You can't think of any can you? That's because in reality marijuana has never harmed anyone, and it never will. I honestly believe this drug saved my life, so why must I have to risk jail or prison time just to stay healthy? Please see this Bill through for the benefit of thousands of patients all across Pennsylvania. We are patients with very few safe choices, we are not criminals.

NOTE: I would like to add here that much of what went on during my withdrawal from Cymbalta is based in part on observations from friends and family as I have many lapses in memory associated with this time period, there is much from the past few years that I fear I may never remember and much more that I wish I could forget. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Thank you for the opportunity to be heard.

Dated: 11/10/2009

Sincerely,



Joanne Ungarsky

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