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Sarasota forum shows medical cannabis not just business — it's personal



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A full crowd attended the Downtown Sarasota Condo Association's forum "Get Well With Medical Cannabis" on Thursday at the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Sarasota. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / MICHAEL MOORE JR.]

According to a recent study by Alcara Research, 64% of respondents said that they took some form of medical cannabis or CBD in order to reduce pain — while 61% said it was to treat sleeping problems, with another 59% using the products to reduce anxiety.

SARASOTA — The discussion surrounding medical marijuana has changed a lot over the years.

It's changed enough that a medical cannabis forum was held in the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Sarasota on a Thursday and the room was packed with experts, vendors and audience members interested in hearing how the industry will continue to change. The forum, sponsored by the Downtown Sarasota Condo Association and entitled "Get Well With Medical Cannabis," featured panel discussions from researchers, advocates and attorneys who specialize in the subject.

For many, the fight for medical marijuana is more than just business — it's personal.

Josephine Cannella-Krehl, a longtime clinical social worker and medical marijuana advocate, began researching cannabis as a therapeutic agent after her father was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Now, as the founder of the medical marijuana education organization MMJ Knowledge, she assists patients in navigating the muddy, and often confusing waters of Florida's medical cannabis program while offering support services and education sessions. But ask Cannella-Krehl or anyone else on the panels and they emphasize the fight for medical marijuana is far from over.

"Politicians have become pseudo-physicians and medical experts deciding with the stroke of a pen which illness is treated and which isn't. Determining which illness is worthy and which isn't. Deciding who goes to treatment and who goes to jail based on the state," Cannella-Krehl said in a video during her presentation "Cannabis Therapeutics: Clearing the Air."

She dedicated the video to her friend, Drew, who she said died while they waited for then-Gov. Rick Scott to sign medical cannabis legislation into law.

“I believe cannabis should be a first-course option and not just a last resort,” Cannella-Krehl said after the video. “Personally, I don’t believe anybody should be made a criminal for using a plant that has been shown to be so safe and effective when mindfully administered.”

As a hospice medical social worker and the daughter of a terminal patient, Cannella-Krehl has seen the gamut of treatments that come during end-of-life care. When her father’s radiologist recommended another round of chemotherapy instead of hospice care, despite his prognosis of three months to live, she said she had to “step out of her daughter role and into my role as a social worker” and start looking for different options.

Even in the states where it has been legalized as medical marijuana, it is still a Schedule 1 drug federally, which complicates things and leaves patients and caregivers like Cannella-Krehl with difficult choices.

Speaker Carmen Brace, founder of Alcara Research, faced the same predicament. She wants to make the choice of treatments to use easier by conducting consumer research on cannabis with the goal of de-stigmatization.

“It prevents people like me from becoming criminals just because they are not willing to let their mother waste away, not eating and not remembering who they are. It’s something I was willing to do and I know that there are many people out there that are willing to do the same thing,” Brace said.

Recent findings in an Alcara Research study said over 80% of those surveyed indicated that either cannabis or CBD products were more effective than the traditional categories of medicine that they were previously taking, with nearly half of them using a CBD product daily, similar to a vitamin supplement.

Brace said use seems to be growing, not because it’s trendy, but because there is a need. According to the study, 64% of respondents said that they took some form of medical cannabis or CBD to reduce pain — while 61% said it was to treat sleeping problems, with another 59% using the products to reduce anxiety.

As common as those afflictions are in society, Brace said it is important to understand consumers’ needs for CBD and similar products. “It’s not about getting high, it’s about getting well,” she said.