

The pattern that surrounds Idaho's pot vote

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Big pharmaceutical companies supported legislators who, it turns out, helped stop the state's nascent step toward medicinal marijuana.

And the politicians who took little or no money from drug companies?

They supported the bill.

Coincidence?

You be the judge.

At issue was Senate Bill 1146, which sought to permit the use of oil extracted from hemp that shows promise in treating Dravet Syndrome. The ailment causes severe, debilitating seizures in children.

The oil is low in THC, the compound that gets users high. But it's rich in cannabidiol, or CBD. Anecdotally, CBD has helped enough kids who did not respond to conventional therapy that lawmakers in states such as Utah have authorized its use.

Idaho seemed to be on the same path.

The Senate approved it 22-12. In the House, it passed 39-30.

Then Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter vetoed it, citing the opposition from prosecutors, law enforcement and his own Office of Drug Policy. In its place, Otter issued an executive order designating the Department of Health and Welfare to look into and implement an FDA- approved study into the drug Epidiolex.

Epidiolex is the trade name for purified CBD.

After the veto, Kelcie Moseley, a former Lewiston Tribune reporter now writing for the Idaho Press Tribune of Nampa, pored over campaign finance reports.

She found a pattern.

Within her Canyon County legislative delegation, most of lawmakers who voted against allowing CBD took campaign contributions from the likes of Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline, Sunovion, Amgen and Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America.

Conversely, those who voted for the bill took little or no industry campaign cash.

If you replicated Moseley's study statewide, you'd start with Otter, who collected \$24,000 from drug companies.

Then you'd look at the Senate. Drug companies spread \$16,000 among the dozen members who opposed legalizing cannabinoid. Only \$10,000 went to the 22 state senators who supported the bill.

In other words, those who voted against the bill tended to get almost three times as much pharma money as those who voted yes.

In the House, the 30 who voted no received \$22,650 vs. \$10,800 split among the 39 members who supported the bill.

Again, those who voted no averaged three times more pharma money than those who voted yes.

You never quite see a quid pro quo. Money buys access and cements relationships, but it doesn't buy votes. For instance, state Rep. Fred Wood, R-Burley, who is also a retired medical doctor, voted for the CBD bill in spite of the fact that he took \$5,450 from pharma.

The industry did not lobby lawmakers one way or the other. Boise attorney Jeremy Pisca, who represents Astellas and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association, told Moseley he stayed out of it. He wasn't asked to follow the bill or present a client's viewpoint.

Maybe Pisca's lobbying was not required. It makes sense that drug companies would nurture political careers of people closest to their profession - physicians such as Lewiston's John Rusche - or members of the House or Senate health and welfare committees who tend to deal with health issues.

Rusche, who was the sole House Democrat to oppose the bill, said he could not support the introduction of drugs before they are tested and certified safe and effective. Rusche collected \$2,350 from pharma.

Within north central Idaho, only Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, joined Rusche in opposing the bill. Johnson took no pharmaceutical campaign cash.

Neither did Reps. Paulette Jordan, D-Plummer, Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, Dan Rudolph, D-Lewiston, Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton, and Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins.

Sens. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, accepted \$450 from the industry. Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, took \$200.

In other words, much of the measure's support came from people outside the health care network. Key among them were Senate State Affairs Committee Chairman Curt McKenzie, R-Nampa, and House State Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Loertscher, R-Iona.

McKenzie got \$400 from the industry; Loertscher took zero.

Speaking to the Press Tribune's Moseley, McKenzie made the customary comment about not delving into lawmakers' motivations for how they voted on the measure.

"However," he told Moseley, "I do believe that it is in the best interest of the pharmaceutical company to try and defeat laws that allow parents to access CBD oil on the free market." - M.T.