

Otter's flip-flop on medical marijuana hurts Idaho kids
By Wayne Hoffman
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Here's a study in contrasts and contradictions: Nine years ago, Republican Butch Otter proclaimed his support for medical marijuana. Yet this year, he vetoed a bill that would have let parents give their sick kids a treatment using an oil derived from marijuana plants.

Then there's Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott. Abbott vehemently opposes medical marijuana. But unlike Otter, just days ago Abbott signed a bill similar to the one Otter vetoed. The new Texas law will let parents of children with severe, life-threatening epilepsy treat their kids with cannabidiol oil, which, while extracted from marijuana plants, has only trace amounts of the euphoria-producing THC; in other words, cannabidiol oil stops seizures without a high.

Abbott said the Texas bill will "provide healing and hope for children that are afflicted by unrelenting seizures caused by epilepsy."

Otter said the Idaho bill "asks us to legalize the limited use of cannabidiol oil, contrary to federal law. And it asks us to look past the potential for misuse and abuse with criminal intent."

In Texas, Leslie Moccia is optimistic about the new, now legal treatment for her son, Zachariah, who has also suffered from severe intractable epileptic seizures for much of his 25 years.

"It gives us hope. We were out of treatment options," Leslie said in an Associated Press article.

Meanwhile, in Idaho, Holli Bunderson is the parent of a child looking for treatment help. She told KTVB-TV that Otter's veto has left her "very angry and hurt and saddened because there are a lot of kids waiting for this medication, a lot of people waiting."

In 2006, Reason Magazine interviewed Otter, allowing the then-congressman-and-future-governor to pontificate on a number of issues. The magazine's interest in Otter had to do with the politician's supposed libertarian leanings. Among his other musings, Otter told the magazine, "I still support medical marijuana ... You go to some of these places where people have cancer. Some of these people, the only way they can get relief is by smoking marijuana."

To recap, cannabidiol oil produces no high whatsoever. Medical marijuana does produce a high; it is obviously intended to do so as a palliative treatment for disease. If Otter truly believes in medical marijuana, as he told the magazine, signing the cannabidiol oil bill should have been easy for him.

In April, I emailed Otter spokesman Jon Hanian for his explanation of the discrepancy between Otter in 2006 and the Otter of today. Hanian never answered, which is unusual for the usually dutiful press secretary. I emailed again a few days ago, and still got no response. Finally, in a phone conversation, Hanian said flatly, "I don't have a comment for you about that."

Still, I pressed: Did Otter really support medical marijuana in 2006, as he told Reason? Does he support it now? Did he change his mind? Repeated Hanian, "I don't have a comment for you on that."

In other words, we'll never know. What we do know is, if Otter used to be a libertarian (and that's a big "if"), he certainly is not one now.

Meanwhile, Gov. Abbott signed his state's bill, looked families with epileptic children in the eye and said, "A law that will help these children is now in effect."

But not in Idaho.