R.I.P. Medical Marijuana Pioneer Dennis Peron

Peron's Cannabis Buyer's Club provided a place for people with AIDS and cancer to safely obtain and use medical marijuana.

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Dennis Peron, who spearheaded the fight for medical marijuana, died on January 27 after a long battle with lung cancer at the age of 71.

Previously a well-known local marijuana purveyor in San Francisco, Peron began to publicly advocate for medical cannabis in the early 1990s after seeing how it helped people with AIDS, including his late partner, cope with symptoms such as pain, nausea and wasting.

Not long after I moved to San Francisco in the mid-1990s, I began covering HIV for the Bay Area Reporter, the nation's longest-running LGBT newspaper. This beat included the many legal battles over medical cannabis at the city, state and federal levels.

Peron opened the first public cannabis dispensary in the United States, the San Francisco Cannabis Buyer's Club, which aimed to provide a safe place for sick people to safely obtain and use medical marijuana. It also became a cultural hub and headquarters of the fight for medical cannabis in California.

"Dennis deserves singular credit for imagining and launching the medical marijuana movement during the darkest days of the AIDS pandemic," according to long-time activist Cleve Jones. "He fought for patients' access, was arrested multiple times and never backed down."

Peron and others wrote the ballot initiative Prop 215, the Compassionate Use Act, which California voters passed by 56 percent in November 1996. The legislation—which allowed people with HIV, cancer and other illnesses to grow and possess cannabis with a doctor's recommendation—was the first state medical marijuana law, coming into conflict with the still-existing federal prohibition on marijuana use for any purpose.

Although Peron's medical marijuana advocacy was most closely associated with AIDS, his Cannabis Buyer's Club always welcomed people with cancer, many of whom find that cannabis helps relieve cancer symptoms and treatment side effects.

A recent survey found that nearly a quarter of cancer patients treated through the Seattle Cancer

Care Alliance had used cannabis within the past year. Survey participants said they used marijuana to relieve pain and nausea, stimulate their appetite, improve their mood and help them sleep.

Federal restrictions limit research on medical marijuana, but a recent research review by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine concluded that cannabis and its chemical components can reduce chronic pain and help manage chemotherapy-induced nausea.

Writing Peron's obituary for the Bay Area Reporter gave me a chance to reconnect with Donald Abrams, MD, now at the UCSF Osher Center for Integrative Medicine.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Abrams was a leading HIV/AIDS doctor who conducted numerous community-based trials and studies of complementary therapies, including cannabis. He later shifted to oncology and until last year was chief of the Hematology-Oncology Division at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. He is a former president of the Society for Integrative Oncology and co-edited a textbook on Integrative Oncology with Andrew Weil, MD.

As you can see in the premier issue of Cancer Health, we're interested in covering both complementary and integrative therapies and the latest cutting-edge treatments like CAR-T therapy, and I look forward to writing more about Abrams's work in the future.

Over the years, Peron's views about the benefits of marijuana entered the mainstream: Today, more than half the states allow medical use of cannabis, including nine that have also legalized recreational use.

"We all owe a debt of gratitude to Dennis Peron for his vision and perseverance," Abrams said. "He understood, before many others, the therapeutic potential of the remarkable plant that is so closely associated with his name. I am just glad to know that he lived to see the tremendous results of his pioneering passion."

Click here to read the Bay Area Reporter's obituary for Dennis Peron.

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