

Cannabis and Chronic Pain

Persistent and disabling pain can have numerous and sometimes multiple causes. Among them are cancer; AIDS; sickle cell anemia; multiple sclerosis; defects or injuries to the back, neck and spinal cord; arthritis and other rheumatic and degenerative hip, joint and connective tissue disorders; and severe burns. Pain is not a primary condition or injury, but rather a severe, frequently intolerable symptom that varies in frequency, duration, and severity according to the individual. The underlying condition determines the appropriate curative approach, but does not determine the proper symptom management. It is the character, severity, location and duration of the pain that determines the range of appropriate therapies.

Chronic pain is a public health issue that is widespread across the aging populations of industrialized nations. Epidemiological statistics are alarming: In Europe, it is estimated that one in four adults has a chronic pain condition.[17] In the US, it is estimated that at least 38 million adults suffer from chronic pain, and at least 12 million have used cannabis as a treatment.

For patients in pain, the goal is to function as fully as possible by reducing their pain as much as possible, while minimizing the often-debilitating side effects of the pain therapies. Failure to adequately treat severe and/or chronic pain can have tragic consequences. Not infrequently, people in unrelieved pain want to die. Despair can also cause patients to discontinue potentially life-saving procedures (e.g., chemotherapy or surgery), which themselves cause severe suffering. In such dire cases, anything that helps to alleviate the pain will prolong these patients' lives.

Cannabis can serve at least two important roles in safe, effective pain management. It can provide relief from the pain itself (either alone or in combination with other analgesics), and it can control the nausea associated with taking opioid drugs, as well as the nausea, vomiting and dizziness that often accompany severe, prolonged pain.

Opioid therapy is often an effective treatment for severe pain, but all opiates have the potential to induce nausea. The intensity and duration of this nausea can cause enormous discomfort and additional suffering and lead to malnourishment, anorexia, wasting, and a severe decline in a patient's health. Some patients find the nausea so intolerable that they are inclined to discontinue the primary pain treatment, rather than endure the nausea.

Inhaled cannabis provides almost immediate relief for this with significantly fewer adverse effects than orally ingested Marinol. Inhalation allows the active compounds in cannabis to be absorbed into the blood stream with greater speed and efficiency. It is for this reason that inhalation is an increasingly common, and often preferable, route of administration for many medications. Cannabis may also be more effective than Marinol because it contains many more cannabinoids than just the THC that is Marinol's active ingredient. The additional cannabinoids may well have additional and complementary antiemetic qualities. They have been conclusively shown to have better paincontrol properties when taken in combination than THC alone.

Research on cannabis and pain management

People can experience persistent and disabling pain as the result of numerous and sometimes multiple causes. Among them are injuries to the back, neck and spinal cord; cancer; AIDS; sickle cell anemia; multiple sclerosis; defects or injuries to the back, neck and spinal cord; arthritis and other rheumatic and degenerative hip, joint and connective tissue disorders; and severe burns. Pain is not a primary condition or injury, but rather a severe, frequently intolerable symptom that varies in frequency, duration, and severity according to the individual. The underlying condition determines the appropriate curative approach, but does not determine the proper symptom management. It is the character, severity, location and duration of the pain that determines the range of appropriate therapies.

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Research on cannabis and pain management.

Cannabis has been used as an analgesic for at least 5,000 years,²⁹⁻³¹ and patients often report significant pain relief from cannabis, even in cases where conventional pain therapies have failed.³²⁻³⁷ Research has even shown that the natural endocannabinoid system has a role in regulating migraines.³⁸⁻⁴⁰

After reviewing a series of trials in 1997, the U.S. Society for Neuroscience concluded that “substances similar to or derived from marijuana could benefit the more than 97 million Americans who experience some form of pain each year.”⁴¹ A 1999 study commissioned by the White House and conducted by the Institute of Medicine also recognized the role that cannabis can play in treating chronic pain: “After nausea and vomiting, chronic pain was the condition cited most often to the IOM study team as a medicinal use for marijuana.”⁴² Between 1975 and 2009, there were more than 300 studies showing that cannabinoids and cannabis can help patients experiencing chronic pain.⁴³

Orthopedic injuries including loss of limbs can result in chronic pain that is very difficult to treat. Military operations just in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in 1,715 amputations as of December 2012.⁴⁴ Amputations commonly result in phantom limb pain, a serious neuropathic pain condition affecting 50-80 percent of amputees, sometimes for many years. Phantom limb pain may occur during the first year after amputation and often remains chronic over months or years, either with no improvement or an increase in pain.⁴⁵⁻⁵⁸

Among U.S. veterans with current significant phantom limb pain, 27 percent had pain for more than 20 days per month, 10 percent for 11 to 20 days, 14 percent for 6 to 10 days, and 49 percent for 5 days or less

per month.⁵⁹ Phantom limb pain is often poorly understood and difficult to manage. Current treatments include physical, behavioral, and medical approaches, including opioids and adjunct medications.⁶⁰

A 1984 survey of 5,000 US veterans with amputations related to military service found that 78 percent had current phantom limb pain and only 1 percent had experienced relief from any treatment.⁶¹ A small study of 48 British veterans with phantom limb pain found that 56 percent reported no relief from any pain medications.⁶² That difficulty in relieving pain is common to other types of chronic neuropathic pain, such as may result from cancer, HIV/AIDS, or diabetes.

Cannabinoids may provide relief; some of the most encouraging clinical data on effects of cannabinoids on chronic pain are from studies of neuropathic pain.⁶³⁻⁶⁸ The effectiveness of cannabis and cannabinoids in relieving neuropathic pain has been demonstrated in more than three dozen preclinical and clinical trials.⁶⁹ It is often effective when opioid painkillers have failed to provide relief.⁷⁰ A trial of smoked cannabis to treat HIV-associated daily neuropathic pain in 50 patients showed an average reduction of pain by 30 percent over a treatment course of only five days.⁷¹ Cannabis can be effective for neuropathic pain even at low doses.⁷² Multiple trials indicate that a whole-plant cannabis extract (Sativex®) is effective in reducing pain in patients suffering intractable neuropathic pain.^{72,73} A review of over 20 clinical trials on cannabis and cannabinoids found that whole plant cannabis and extracts are superior to oral THC for the treatment of pain. Health Canada approved Sativex® for prescription in the treatment of HIV-associated neuropathic pain in 2005 and cancer pain in 2007. The mechanism for that analgesic action involves both the body's cannabinoid receptors and direct action on the neurons that transmit pain.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁵

The activity of the more than 100 cannabinoids and other components on the plant may explain its superiority in reducing pain when comparing whole plant cannabis and extracts to THC alone. For instance, the cannabinoids cannabidiol (CBD) and cannabichromene (CBC), the second and third most common active compounds on the plant, exhibit anti-inflammatory and analgesic actions, although weaker than THC. Similarly, beta-sitosterol, a non-cannabinoid ingredient found in cannabis, was able to decrease inflammation and edema in skin treatment.⁷⁶ And a unique flavanoid found only in cannabis, cannafavin A, inhibits the inflammatory molecule PGE-2, thirty times more potently than aspirin.⁷⁷ Lastly beta-caryophyllene, a cannabinoid found in many plants besides cannabis, has strong anti-inflammatory properties but no noticeable side effects.⁷⁸ Beta-caryophyllen is the most commonly consumed FDA-approved cannabinoid in food.

The IOM report found that “basic biology indicates a role for cannabinoids in pain and control of movement, which is consistent with a possible therapeutic role in these areas. The evidence is relatively strong for the treatment of pain and intriguingly, although less well established, for movement disorder.” According to the IOM Report and numerous independent research articles, a number of areas in the brain that have an established role in sensing and processing pain respond to the analgesic effect of cannabis, adding that cannabinoids have been used successfully to treat cancer pain, which is often resistant to treatment with opiates. The effectiveness of cannabinoids in treating intractable cancer pain has been demonstrated in several subsequent clinical trials of a dosage-controlled sublingual spray.

Several studies have found that cannabinoids have analgesic effects in animal models, sometimes equivalent to codeine.⁷⁹⁻⁸³ Cannabinoids also seem to synergize with opioids, which often lose their effectiveness as patients build up tolerance. One study found morphine was 15 times more active in rats with the addition of a small dose of THC. Codeine was enhanced on the order of 900 fold.⁸⁴ In 1990, researchers conducted a double-blind study comparing the antispasmodic and analgesic effects of THC, oral Codeine, and a placebo on a single patient suffering from a spinal cord injury.⁸⁵ Their findings confirmed the analgesic effects of THC being “equivalent to codeine.” A 1997 study made similar findings related to morphine.⁸⁶

A 1999 article reviewing the body of scientific animal research concerning the analgesic effects of marijuana concludes that “[t]here is now unequivocal evidence that cannabinoids are antinociceptive [capable of blocking the appreciation or transmission of pain] in animal models of acute pain.”⁸⁷

The report further notes that multiple cannabinoids and noncannabinoid components can serve as anti-inflammatory agents, and so have potential in preventing and reducing pain caused by swelling (such as arthritis).

In short, the research community recognizes the potential benefits of cannabis for certain patients, including:

- Chemotherapy patients, especially those being treated for mucositis, nausea, and anorexia.
- Postoperative pain patients (using cannabinoids as an opioid adjunct to reduce the nausea and vomiting).
- Patients with spinal cord injury, peripheral neuropathic pain, or central post-stroke pain.
- Patients with chronic pain and insomnia.
- AIDS patients with cachexia, AIDS neuropathy, or any significant pain.

Britain's House of Lords reached similar conclusions and called for making cannabis available by prescription.[88]

HOW CANNABIS COMPARES TO OTHER TREATMENTS

Chronic Pain Medications

According to the Institute of Medicine, "All of the currently available analgesic (pain-relieving) drugs have limited efficacy for some types of pain. Some are limited by dose-related side effects and some by the development of tolerance or dependence."

The opioid analgesics commonly used to combat pain include **codeine** (Dolacet, Hydrocet, Lorcet, Lortab); **morphine** (Avinza, Oramorph); **oxycodone** (Vicodin, Oxycontin, Roxicodone, Percocet, Roxicet); **propoxyphene** (Darvon, Darvocet) and **tramadol** (Ultram, Ultracet). These medicines can cause psychological and physical dependence, as well as constipation, dizziness, lightheadedness, mood changes, nausea, sedation, shortness of breath and vomiting. Taking high doses or mixing with alcohol can slow down breathing, a potentially fatal condition.

In addition, patients in pain are often prescribed muscle relaxants such as **Robaxin** and **Flexeril**; anti-anxiety agents such as **Valium**, **Sinequan**, **Vistaril**, **Ativan** and **Xanax**; hypnotics such as **Halcion**, **Restoril**, **Chloralhydrate**, **Dalmane** and **Doral** and anti-emetics such as **Zofran**, **Compazine**, **Phenergan**, **Tigan** and **Marinol**.

Robaxin's side effects include abnormal taste, amnesia, blurred vision, confusion, dizziness, drop in blood pressure and fainting, drowsiness, fever, flushing, headache, hives, indigestion, insomnia, itching, lightheadedness, nasal congestion, nausea, pinkeye, poor coordination, rash, seizures, slowed heartbeat, uncontrolled eye movement, vertigo, vomiting and yellow eyes and skin.

Flexeril can cause abnormal heartbeats, aggressive behavior, agitation, anxiety, bloated feeling, blurred vision, confusion, constipation, convulsions, decreased appetite, depressed mood, diarrhea, difficulty falling or staying asleep, difficulty speaking, disorientation, double vision, excitement, fainting, fatigue, fluid retention, gas, hallucinations, headache, heartburn, hepatitis, hives, increased heart rate, indigestion, inflammation of the stomach, itching, lack of coordination, liver diseases, loss of sense of taste, low blood pressure, muscle twitching, nausea, nervousness, palpitations, paranoia, rash, ringing in the ears, severe allergic reaction, stomach and intestinal pain, sweating, swelling of the tongue or face, thirst, tingling in hands or feet, tremors, unpleasant taste in the mouth, urinating more or less than usual, vague feeling of bodily discomfort, vertigo, vomiting, weakness, and yellow eyes and skin.

The newer antiemetics, **Anzamet**, **Kytril** and **Zofran**, are serotonin antagonists, blocking the neurotransmitter that sends a vomiting signal to the brain. Rare side effects of these drugs include fever, fatigue, bone pain, muscle aches, constipation, loss of appetite, inflammation of the pancreas, changes in electrical activity of heart, vivid dreams, sleep problems, confusion, anxiety and facial swelling.

Reglan, a substituted benzamide, increases emptying of the stomach, thus decreasing the chance of developing nausea and vomiting due to food remaining in the stomach. When given at high doses, it blocks the messages to the part of the brain responsible for nausea and vomiting. Side effects include sleepiness, restlessness, diarrhea and dry mouth. Rarer side effects are rash, hives and decreased blood pressure.

Haldol and **Inapsine** are tranquilizers that block messages to the part of the brain responsible for nausea and vomiting. Possible side effects include decreased breathing rate, increased heart rate, decrease in blood pressure when changing position and, rarely, change in electrical activity of the heart.

Compazine and **Torecan** are phenothiazines, the first major anti-nausea drugs. Both have tranquilizing effects. Common side effects include dry mouth and constipation. Less common effects are blurred vision, restlessness, involuntary muscle movements, tremors, increased appetite, weight gain, increased heart rate and changes in electrical activity of heart. Rare side effects include jaundice, rash, hives and increased sensitivity to sunlight.

Benadryl, an antihistamine, is given along with Reglan, Haldol, Inapsine, Compazine and Torecan to counter side effects of restlessness, tongue protrusion and involuntary movements. Its side effects include sedation, drowsiness, dry mouth, dizziness, confusion, excitability and decreased blood pressure.

Benzodiazepine drugs **Ativan** and **Xanax** are prescribed to combat the anxiety associated with chronic pain. Ativan causes amnesia. Abruptly stopping the drug can cause anxiety, dizziness, nausea and vomiting, and tiredness. It can cause drowsiness, confusion, weakness and headache when first starting the drug. Nausea, vomiting, dry mouth, changes in heart rate and blood pressure and palpitations are possible side effects.

Cannabis: By comparison, the side effects associated with cannabis are typically mild and are classified as “low risk.” Euphoric mood changes are among the most frequent side effects. Cannabinoids can exacerbate schizophrenic psychosis in predisposed persons, though it can also provide symptomatic relief in refractory schizophrenia. Cannabinoids impede cognitive and psychomotor performance, resulting in temporary impairment. Chronic use can lead to the development of tolerance. Tachycardia and hypotension are frequently documented as potentially adverse events in the cardiovascular system. A few cases of myocardial ischemia have been reported in young and previously healthy patients. Inhaling the smoke of cannabis cigarettes induces side effects on the respiratory system. Cannabinoids are contraindicated for patients with a history of cardiac ischemias. In summary, a low risk profile is evident from the literature available. Serious complications are extremely rare and are not usually reported during the use of cannabinoids for medical indications.

THE EXPERIENCE OF PATIENTS

Angel McClary Raich

I have been permanently disabled since September 1995. I am a mother of two teenage children. My children know more than anyone how medical cannabis brought their mommy back to them. The hardest part of being disabled is watching the suffering in your children's eyes as they watch you endure such suffering with no end in sight.

In late 1997, my doctor felt cannabis would be an effective medication to treat my many complicated and complex medical conditions. I was in a wheelchair from January 1996 to August 1999. Cannabis was

responsible for getting me out of my wheelchair and restoring mobility on the whole right side of my body. For years I felt s if I was suffering in Hell. What I had to endure was unbelievable and indescribable torture.

I suffer greatly from severe chronic pain every single day. The prolonged pain and suffering from my medical conditions significantly interferes with my quality of life. My treatment is complicated by the fact that I am violently allergic and have severe multiple chemical sensitivities to almost all pharmaceutical medicines. This interferes with the treatment of all of my medical conditions, and it means my suffering cannot be controlled by synthetic medications. This makes it extremely difficult for doctors to effectively help me combat my diseases. Without cannabis my life would be a death sentence.[54]

Dorothy Gibbs

In 1911, at the age of one, I contracted the polio virus. The early onset of polio caused permanent damage in my legs, spine, and back, resulting in significant weakness and atrophy in my legs. As a result, I have never been able to walk without the assistance of crutches and braces or a wheelchair. Approximately 30 years ago, my condition began to deteriorate. I began to suffer from increasing levels of pain and weakness in my legs and back as well as severe osteoarthritis in my hands, arms, and joints. Over time, my deteriorating medical condition has been exacerbated by my pain, leaving me increasingly immobilized.

By May, 1996, my physician [Dr. Arnold Leff, M.D.] had tried various prescription medications to relieve my pain, including: Tylenol #3, Ultram, Daypro, Tegretol, Soma, Valium, steroid injections into the trigger point, Dilantin, Duragesic, Zofran and Comapazine for the nausea caused by the opioid pain relievers, and Doloboid and Lodine as nonsteroids. Nothing seemed to work, and the pain persisted. I was growing increasingly depressed by the inability of anything to relieve my pain. During this period it was clear to me, my caretaker and my physician that nothing was working to combat my pain. My caretaker, Pat, had heard of the success some people experience with the medicinal use of marijuana for pain management. Sometime during the end of 1997, she obtained a sample for me. Although I had never used marijuana in my previous eighty-seven years of life, I was willing to try anything that could alleviate even part of the pain.

The relief I experienced from medical marijuana was almost immediate. I was so pleased with the result that I wrote to Dr. Leff about my use of medical marijuana and we talked about the benefits of the medicine. Dr. Leff examined me and noted that medical marijuana helped me experience less chronic pain and nausea, leading him to recommended medical marijuana as part of my daily pain care regimen... I strongly feel that I should have the right to use anything that may relieve any or some of my pain, and my last days should not be spent suffering. . . . Ever since trying medical marijuana, my life has drastically improved. Although chronic pain, related to my post-polio syndrome will always be a part of my life, medical marijuana had helped me manage this pain by providing fast and effective relief for my muscle spasms, acute pains, and arthritis.

Since I began using medical marijuana, my pain is no longer persistent or debilitating. When I do suffer from pain, I am usually able to "get ahead of it" by using medical marijuana and make it manageable.

Jim Champion

As a member of the 502nd infantry, 101st airborne, my unit was deployed to the kingdom of Jordan in the late 1980's. Soon after, I found myself diagnosed with MS awaiting a medical discharge instead of starting my second enlistment.

I've presently had MS for over 25 years, but I first tried cannabis for my condition about 11 years ago. Each time I went to the doctor with spasms or atrophy that was bending my body into painful and unnatural positions, I'd walk out with a new muscle relaxer or pain pill. By 2003 I found myself taking a cocktail of approximately 59 pills a day, which did little for the pain and spasms and instead turned me into what felt

like a sleeping zombie. I'd literally fall asleep in the middle of a conversation! I was a prisoner in my own body.

Later that year I had a muscle spasm which lasted for days. Nothing I did or took would stop it. My cousin came over and convinced me to try cannabis. By the time we finished my body had stopped twitching, and I felt relaxed for the first time in a long time. I was also experiencing another strange sensation—I was hungry!

At first, my wife didn't like my smoking on top of all the pills I was taking, but cannabis was providing unparalleled relief from the painful spasms and atrophy. No spasms or atrophy, no pain! After discussing it with her, we took inventory of my pills and began tapering down the ones I no longer needed thanks to the relief provided by one cannabis cigarette a day. We not only reduced the overall number of my pills to just 24 per day, we were able to eliminate some intoxicating medicines all together. By the time we were finished I no longer took Valium, Xanax for tremors, Gabapentin, morphine and Vicodin for breakthrough pain, and several others. Also, I reduced the number of methadone I take per day.

Since that time I have literally been a new man. I used to lay in bed for weeks at a time. I neither had the energy nor desire to ever leave my house. The pills were making me sicker and weaker. Now I only stay in bed at night and I go out often (when it's warmer outside) and do the things I love. If I'm not going to a Bears/Blackhawks/Bulls/Cubs game, I'm going to Springfield to help pass our bill. Cannabis has allowed me to enjoy an active life that I thought had long passed me by. Eleven years later, and I still only smoke between one and two cannabis cigarettes per day. If smoking is not for you, they have edibles, vaporizers, tinctures and other ways of dispensing the product.

Michael Krawitz

I am a disabled United States Air Force Veteran. I joined through the delayed enlistment program in high school and served from November 1981 thru January 1986 as an avionics [onboard aircraft] Electronic Warfare Systems Technician.

I was serving with the 52nd Avionics Maintenance Squadron in Guam, USA when I was injured in a motorcycle accident on my way home from dinner. My last Friday night on Guam, I talked my buddy into letting me ride his shiny new motorcycle home from our celebratory dinner and in my zeal to be careful on his new bike I was traveling in the far right lane which, much to my surprise, became a turning lane with no sign for warning. The right lane of the road I was on suddenly ended in a curb and I hit it, launching me over the bars into a stop sign pole that was intended for the entering traffic and to which I was only able to see in profile. That injured my spleen, nicked my pancreas, and broke my leg badly enough that I needed an artificial hip. A secondary infection meant they had to leave my abdomen open for a month and a half after they removed part of my intestine and performed an end to end bowel resection. I was in the hospital in Hawaii that I was medi-evaced to for 85 days recovering and battling pain.

My first medical marijuana: I wasn't in very good condition even after I was finally released from the general surgery ward into a private room in the orthopedics ward. I was still segregated because of my infection. The nurse wheeled me into a common bay so I could be near other troops and see the TV, I guess to cheer me up a bit. While watching TV one of the other injured soldiers in the ward with me offered me a butt end of a joint. I figured I wasn't going back to my unit, and I could see no reason why not to indulge. I really didn't see this as a medicine but recreation sounded pretty darn good at that moment. I wheeled into my bathroom in my wheelchair to smoke it and what I found from the cannabis was not a giddy feeling of getting high that I would have expected but more of a release from the tension and pain that had gripped my body as my stomach slowly healed. Over the coming days I would smoke the cannabis whenever I could, and in just a few days I was able to lower my bed flat enough that all at once every bone in my back seemed to pop back into it's rightful place. My mother and father had visited me just weeks before and they hoped to hear progress but were shocked when the nurse told them I had ambulated off the ward on my own. At first a Ranger in a walking cast would push me out to the parking lot to smoke a joint and later I had fashioned a cane to my long arm cast on the left and with my cast covering my whole right leg I had crutch walked out of the hospital on my own so that I could smoke freely. Cannabis definitely helped me

get me out of the hospital faster than they expected. Those trips to the parking lot were my work-outs. It took me a long time to put together that I was getting therapeutic benefit from it though. Back in my duty station I was relegated to a desk job while they figured out what to do with me and they kept me comfortable with pain pills. It wasn't until after that duty station at Offutt AFB in Omaha, after my service ended, that I started seeing myself as a medical cannabis user.

By then I was dealing with long-term chronic pain issues. My treatment at the VA was trial and error. They had all this treatment, all these options, and they put me through them all: kinesio therapy, hydro therapy, heat, steroids etc. Some of it was pretty cruel stuff with little potential gain but lots of down side. Until the mid 1990's, I never even asked twice. I tried everything, all with the same effect – very little. I was given significant amounts of Tylenol with everything, 300mg times 2 in my pain meds plus, 1,500-2,000mg separately per day. When the Internet became available Tylenol's bad history of kidney damage in chronic users was one of my first discoveries. I requested and received from that point on only Tylenol free pain treatment. If I have the need I now take Tylenol very rarely.

Ultram was the very last drug I took on faith. It really messed me up. I couldn't pee, couldn't walk, and had vicious headaches. Suddenly, I now empathized with someone beating his head on the floor because it hurt so much that I had seen previously on a TV Migraine documentary. After that, I decided I'm not going to take anything without checking. A VA doctor tried to prescribe me Amitriptyline, Next one tried Nortriptyline. Gabapentin was the third I turned down.

Around that time is when I discovered the history of cannabis. I grew up in the antiques business, so I knew antiques but had never run into a cannabis antique and if you looked up information before the Internet you were caught up in propaganda under the word marijuana. I quickly found that the pharmaceutical companies Parke Davis and Eli Lilly in the 1920's had cannabis text book references in all the key doctors' teaching manual's expressly mentioning it as key therapy for patients who have stomach issues and pain. They presented cannabis as a first-line medicine if the patient can't tolerate opiates. That really got to me and made me mad. A hundred years ago my doctor would have been trained in this, but today I had to go find it out for myself and then go teach my own doctor.

Because of the bowel resection, I can only take a small amount of opiate painkillers before I have serious GI issues. But a little cannabis, just one to two grams a day, helps the opiates work better. Now I only take the smallest Oxycodone pill, 5mg, twice a day -- a dose so low most doctors don't even know they make it. I've found a regimen that works, and I'm grateful. A couple of times I've had gaps, and that's been tough. With chronic pain, if you take my pain treatment away and force me to suffer, I have a real hard time getting back to stable. The last time I was without cannabis during a very stressful time it had negative consequences I am still working to recover from.

Overall, I receive great care at the VA, particularly for my hip, but the administrative side of the VA has been a big problem. When I was told I must sign a pain contract to continue my care, I said I wanted to take the contract to consult with my lawyer. My lawyer said a contract is only a contract if both sides get something. Since I am a Veteran, the VA is already supposed to provide care, so it didn't seem like I was getting anything in exchange for signing it, so I told them I wouldn't sign it. Because of that, they cut me off from all opiate pain management and tried to switch me to the lesser-controlled gabapentin medicine. They were punishing me by cutting off my previously successfully prescribed medicine. But that's unethical. You can't deny medication as punishment, even with prisoners or drug addicts!. Taking a stand helped get the VHA to create a policy so that now using medical cannabis no longer seems to automatically disqualify you from pain management care. To this day I'm still working with the VHA to get fully back into their system.

James Daniel Baehr

In 1994, I was diagnosed with inoperable prostate cancer... the cancer had metastasized to my spine, hips, and ribcage. The neuropathic back pain was excruciating, emanating from my spine to my hips and ribcage.

I also experienced an overall loss of strength that substantially limited my ability to work. Employment in the transportation industry involves a considerable amount of carrying, lifting, and other manual labor that requires flexibility and mobility. The performance of these requirements exacerbated the magnitude and amount of pain I experienced on a daily basis and depleted any energy that had not already been beaten down by the disease itself.

I began taking numerous medications to treat the cancer, the excruciating pain that it caused, and the depression I felt as a result of my prognosis and the profound restrictions on my life. My medications included a daily dosage of 7.5 mg of Lortab (a painkiller), .25 mg of Xanax (which combats depression and anxiety), 40 mg of Paxil (an anti-depressant), and 250 mg of Eulexin (which treats the cancer by reducing the testosterone emitted from adrenal glands), and monthly shots of 7.5 mg of Lupron Depot (a testosterone blocker/hormonal therapy). I suffered various side effects from these medications, including persistent exhaustion, general pain, a lack of mental focus, and overall body tenderness. In combination, these side effects were quite debilitating...

From September through December of 1995, I endured nine weeks of radiation. The treatment left me with continued back pain, intense nausea, loss of appetite, diverticulitis, sleep abnormalities, and digestive and intestinal complications. It also left me increasingly depressed. In late 1994 or 1995, a physician at the Radiology Department at Stanford University Hospital prescribed Marinol to alleviate my pain and nausea from the radiation. I tried the Marinol but did not respond well to it. Not only did Marinol make me feel drugged and not in control of my thoughts or body, but it failed to relieve my painful symptoms. In fact, Marinol just made me feel sicker, upsetting my stomach, disrupting my mental acuity, and causing me to hallucinate. During this period, I was also taking 7.5 mg of Lortab, an opioid analgesic, several times a day and Ambien to help me sleep. These drugs alleviated the pain somewhat, but also made me disoriented, constipated, and caused me to lose my short-term memory and fine motor skills.

Perhaps sensing that my hope was receding as my misery was increasing, a nurse at Stanford Hospital suggested that medical marijuana could alleviate my nausea, restore my appetite, and even help me manage my pain - all potentially without the negative side effects I experienced with Marinol and other medications..

I decided to try a small amount of medical marijuana, and when I did I found that it provided significant relief from the side effects of the cancer medications and the radiation treatment. In addition, it helped reduce the pain I was experiencing from the cancer itself. This new combination of therapies, which included medical marijuana, turned my health around. Where before I had been doubled over with nausea, couldn't eat, or sleep, I was now not only able to handle my medications, but could sleep, eat and manage my pain. I found that a small amount of medical marijuana taken in the evening enabled me to sleep through the entire night so that I no longer needed to take Ambien.

Over time, the pain got progressively worse. In February 1997 I began to take morphine to help with the pain. The amount of morphine that I need to take to adequately control my pain leaves me utterly incapacitated, mentally and physically. Medical marijuana helps me manage my pain, while limiting my dependence on more powerful narcotics.

When I smoke medical marijuana, I can achieve the same degree of pain relief with a much smaller amount of morphine and with far fewer and less harsh side effects. The coupling of medical marijuana with my prescription analgesics has been one of the most significant and successful aspects of my medical treatment.[56]

THE EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORS

Harvey L. Rose, M.D.

Both my research and my many years as a clinician have convinced me that marijuana can serve at least two important roles in safe and effective pain management. Ample anecdotal evidence and clinical observations, as well as significant research findings, strongly indicate that marijuana, for whatever reason, is often effective in relieving pain. This is true across a range of patient populations, including the elderly, the terminally ill seeking comfort in their final days, young adults stricken with life-threatening conditions, and cancer patients unable to tolerate the devastating effects of potentially life-saving therapies. Marijuana is also widely recognized as an antiemetic that reduces the nausea and vomiting often induced by powerful opioid analgesics prescribed for chronic, severe pain, as well as the nausea, vomiting and dizziness which often accompany severe and/or prolonged pain. I have had the benefit of consultations on this subject over many years with a range of treatment providers, including physicians, oncologists, pharmacologists, family practitioners, hospice workers, and pain specialists.

Specifically, I have found that cannabis can have an important opioid-sparing effect for pain patients. That is to say, that patients who are prescribed high doses of opioid analgesics can significantly reduce their reliance on these medications and improve their daily functioning by incorporating cannabis into their pain care regimen.

Marijuana not only has important analgesic properties but it also is an effective and important adjuvant therapy for patients suffering acute and/or chronic pain. No experienced and respected physician will deny that for such patients opioid therapy is central to palliative care. By the same token, the same experienced physicians will readily acknowledge that opioids often induce nausea and vomiting. For a number of pain patients, standard prescription antiemetics (e.g., Compazine, Zofran and Reglan) simply do not substantially reduce their nausea. For many, those medications are substantially less effective, or produce more debilitating side effects, than marijuana.

Quite simply, marijuana can serve much the same function for pain patients undergoing opiate therapy that it does for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy: it suppresses the nausea and vomiting associated with treatment, and reduces the pain associated with prolonged nausea and retching, thereby increasing the chances that the patient will remain compliant with the primary treatment. With both chemotherapy and long-term pain management, failure to obtain and continue proper palliative and adjuvant care can have dire, even fatal, consequences.

Finally, it is important to note that in my clinical experience observing patients who ingest cannabis for relief from pain and nausea and/or to stimulate appetite, I have witnessed no adverse complications. By contrast, many of the first-line pharmaceuticals used to combat cancer, HIV/AIDS, and pain associated with these and other illnesses can induce a variety of iatrogenic effects, including, in some instances, death. While patients may face serious legal implications related to their use of medical marijuana, as a physician I have yet to encounter a medical downside to their cannabinoid therapy. . . .

[A]gainst the backdrop of a growing body of scientific research, the reports of myriad pain patients, and the burgeoning clinical experience of physicians like myself, it is my considered opinion that cannabis can constitute an acceptable and sometimes necessary medicine to alleviate the immediate suffering of certain patients.[57]

Dr. Rose has served as a medical officer in the Air Force, taught at UC Davis School of Medicine, and consulted with state legislative bodies.

Richard I. Gracer, M.D.

For a small number of patients, even aggressive opiate therapies are not sufficient. Unless alternative pain treatments are found for such patients, they will continue to suffer. For those individuals, their daily lives are often tortuous. As a physician, I am acutely aware of the disturbing connection between intractable pain, overwhelming despair, and suicide.

I can state confidently, as a physician with an extensive practice and specialized expertise in pain management, that marijuana can prove (and has proven) medically useful to at least some chronic pain patients. Accordingly, I believe that physicians should be able to recommend and/or prescribe marijuana to patients for whom it is medically appropriate. Absent that authority, my ability to treat my patients and provide relief from horrific pain is undermined, as is the trust essential to therapeutic relationship.

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Robert V. Brody, M.D.

As a physician responsible for the care and treatment of those who live in horrible pain, I believe that these patients need, above all else, the broadest possible range of therapeutic options and as full and accurate information as possible regarding those options as they relate to the individual patient. In recent years, I have noted that the public and the government have become increasingly aware of these needs, and one hopes that measures have been taken to promote adequate pain care for the seriously ill and injured. Several states, including California, have adopted laws and/or guidelines for the prescribing of controlled substances, which seem to permit physicians to treat pain patients without fear of sanction or interference from state authorities.

Insofar as The Compassionate Use Act passed in 1996 expressly provides that chronic pain is a condition for which physicians are authorized to recommend marijuana without threat or fear of punishment, the Act appears to be an additional assurance for physicians like myself that we can rely upon a full range of treatment modalities to care for patients in pain. The IOM Report provides still further support for doctors insofar as it recognizes the potential medical benefits of marijuana... Marijuana has a place in any pain physician's armamentarium.[58]

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