

Patterns of use of medical cannabis among Israeli cancer patients: A single institution experience

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Reference: Waissengrin B, Urban D, Leshem Y, Garty M, and Wolf I. 2015.. Journal of Pain and Symptom Management 49(2): 223-230.

Abstract

Context. The use of the cannabis plant (*Cannabis sativa* L.) for the palliative treatment of cancer patients has been legalized in multiple jurisdictions including Israel. Yet, not much is currently known regarding the efficacy and patterns of use of cannabis in this setting.

Objectives. To analyze the indications for the administration of cannabis among adult Israeli cancer patients and evaluate its efficacy.

Methods. Efficacy and patterns of use of cannabis were evaluated using physician-completed application forms, medical files, and a detailed questionnaire in adult cancer patients treated at a single institution.

Results. Of approximately 17,000 cancer patients seen, 279 (<1.7%) received a permit for cannabis from an authorized institutional oncologist. The median age of cannabis users was 60 years (range 19–93 years), 160 (57%) were female, and 234 (84%) had metastatic disease. Of 151 (54%) patients alive at six months, 70 (46%) renewed their cannabis permit. Renewal was more common among younger patients and those with metastatic disease. Of 113 patients alive and using cannabis at one month, 69 (61%) responded to the detailed questionnaire. Improvement in pain, general well-being, appetite, and nausea were reported by 70%, 70%, 60%, and 50%, respectively. Side effects were mild and consisted mostly of fatigue and dizziness.

Conclusion. Cannabis use is perceived as highly effective by some patients with advanced cancer and its administration can be regulated, even by local authorities. Additional studies are required to evaluate the efficacy of cannabis as part of the palliative treatment of cancer patients. *J Pain Symptom Manage* 2015;49:223–230. © 2015 American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Strengths:

- Questionnaire used Likert scales, which was easy for patients to understand and pilot study was conducted to assure proper wording of questions
- A variety of symptoms were assessed, not just severe/chronic pain
- Broad inclusion criteria of the study population (age, types of cancer, disease extent) makes it more generalizable

Weaknesses:

- Potential for placebo effect given no control group (not a controlled trial)
- Results may be affected by selection bias- only patients actively using cannabis at one month were asked to complete the questionnaire and those who benefitted from cannabis may have been more likely to respond to questionnaire
- Various dosages and routes of administration makes difficult to replicate results
- No cognitive assessments before and after cannabis

- No mention of history of substance use including past marijuana use
- Many confounding factors- other medications and treatments that patients are on not accounted for

Applicability to Palliative Care:

The subjects of this study were similar to the population seen in palliative care. Nearly half of the patients passed away in the first month indicating that they were severely ill. Patients with advanced malignancies may have symptoms that are refractory to current available measures. Due to increasing attention to medicinal uses of cannabis, patients may seek advice from their health care provider regarding the use of cannabis to alleviate their symptoms.