

Cannabinoids: Prevalence of Use, Who, How, Why and When?

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Introduction: The aim was to describe the use of cannabinoids in a population of palliative patients in order to improve understanding of symptom patterns in these patients.

Background

Use of cannabinoid drugs in Denmark is increasing, as the media shows casuistic patient reports with benefits from their use. Consequently, the Danish government has decided to approve the cannabinoid oil and plant extracts for a period of four years to see if any patients benefit from it.

Cannabinoids have well-described side effects; they may cause psychosis, dependency, and other adverse outcomes. Furthermore, cannabinoids may cause interactions with prescribed pharmaceuticals for treatment of the patients. Many clinically trialed drugs also have side effects and interactions between drugs, but in contrast to cannabinoids they are generally well described.

Methods:

The study includes all patients referred to the palliative department of Zealand University Hospital, Roskilde. All patients were included over a period of three and a half months. Patients were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking their gender, age, educational level, previous use of cannabinoids, previous use of state-provided free medicine, who prescribed it, why they used it, and whether it actually helped them relieve their symptoms.

Results

Ninety patients were screened in the study, of which five were discarded due to low performance status and five did not meet the inclusion criteria. 1 patient failed to fill in all the questions. The results show that almost 40 % of our 80 patients had tried cannabinoids as an adjuvant treatment and almost 20 % continued to use cannabinoids. Most of the patients get the drugs from a nonauthorized dealer. Thus, only two patients used prescribed cannabinoids.

One patient hallucinated. Several experienced dizziness or lack of effect. Interestingly, eight (of the 31) patients consuming cannabinoids thought that it might cure their disease.

The patients using cannabinoids were compared with the group of patients not using cannabis regarding age, gender, medical support, educational level.

Discussion

This study had a high frequency of respondents (all asked patients filled in the questionnaire) Previous, American studies have had response rates around forty percent, and showed up to 70% of respondents having previously consuming cannabis, around 20% still using it. 25% of the Danish users expected curative effect on the cancer which is similar to American studies. The American results are from states with legalized cannabis use so it should be comparable, as it is now legal in Denmark. Previously use was much higher in the American studies than we found in our study. More studies are needed to make conclusions, but it seems to be commonly used and we need to be aware about possible side-effects in all patients.

