



## **OLDER AUSTRALIANS USING CANNABIS FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES – NEW STUDY**

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Older Australians are using cannabis for medical purposes to treat a range of health problems, a study released today has found. Chronic pain and arthritis were among the most common medical conditions for which cannabis was reportedly used. Almost one third (31%) of the sample were aged 50 years or over, and one in ten (9%) aged 60 years plus.

Australians who currently use cannabis medicinally do so illegally and without assurances of quality control. To date, there has been little interest in Australia in formally investigating the therapeutic potential of cannabis or investigating the practices of current medical users.

In 2003, the NSW Government announced it would conduct clinical trials looking at the medical use of cannabis. Despite generating significant publicity, there has been no further commitment by the NSW Government on the issue.

Dr Wendy Swift, Lecturer at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales believes the findings challenge the public perception of medical cannabis users.

“This is not simply a group of recreational ‘dope smokers’,” said Dr Swift. “This is particularly true of those in the sample who were aged 50 years or over. Seventy five per cent of this group had never used cannabis before and used exclusively for medical reasons.”

“They did not fit the recreational user stereotype, were willing to take the risk of using an illicit drug, exposure to the illicit drug market and the possibility of arrest to gain symptom relief. Indeed, the most common concerns over medical use was its illegality and fear of arrest.”

Long-term and regular medical cannabis use was frequently reported for multiple medical conditions including chronic pain (57%), depression (56%), arthritis (35%), persistent nausea (27%) and weight loss (26%). Cannabis was perceived to provide “great relief” overall (86%), and substantial relief of specific symptoms such as pain,

nausea and insomnia. It was also typically perceived as superior to other medications in terms of undesirable effects, and the extent of relief provided. However, nearly one half (41%) experienced conditions or symptoms that were not helped by its use. Almost one third (29%) said cannabis was less effective for certain types of pain, or extreme pain, with a further 12% specifying migraine or headache pain. Interestingly, younger participants were more likely than older participants to claim a condition not helped by cannabis.

There was almost universal interest (89%) in participating in a clinical trial of medical cannabis, and strong support (79%) for investigating alternative delivery methods.

“This study found a variety of people were willing to risk legal ramifications to use cannabis for medical purposes, including older people who had never used the drug recreationally,” said Dr Swift. “They claimed to receive significant benefits from its use and were very interested in being involved in clinical trials of cannabis use. They also reported support for their use from their family and doctors.”

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