Marijuana Legislation: Identifying the Impact on the Oral Healthcare Provider

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Abstract

Objectives/Aims: Since the mid-2000s, the United States has seen a surge in legislation involving the legalization of marijuana, both recreationally and medicinally. The relaxed laws translated into an increase of marijuana consumption and thereby a potential increase in the number of patients a provider will see that are cannabis users. The purpose of this review is to illustrate how the providers begin to see pathologies related to cannabis use more frequently, and how they will need to be prepared for ways this can be addressed.

Methods: Research reviewed in this paper was compiled from scholarly articles and peer reviewed journals including PubMed and CINAHL, published within the last five years. Studies were analyzed on the impact legalization and decriminalization laws have on marijuana use. Additional research reviewed numerous pathologies related to marijuana use in the dental cavity.

Results: Based on current proposals, it is expected that 40 states will legalize marijuana by the end of 2020. Studies conducted in states such as Oregon, Colorado, and Alaska have shown an increase in marijuana usage since legalization has occurred. Research reviewed showed multiple conditions related to marijuana use. Periodontitis, xerostomia, oral cancer, and staining are several of the associated pathologies.

Conclusion: Research suggests an anticipated increase of marijuana users in states that will soon pass legalization. Studies have also shown that there is a higher prevalence of pathologies of the oral cavity in cannabis users versus non cannabis users. The oral healthcare provider will treat more pathologies related to cannabis use and deal with the legal challenges presented to them surrounding informed consent.

Discussion

The research is very clear that oral healthcare providers will experience a change in their practice as more states pass marijuana legislation. However, there are certain limitations to previous research that must be addressed. Cannabis will no longer be the illicit drug that is abused. It will be used by everyday people and those with chronic medical conditions that need to be treated. How do dental practitioners deal with informed consent when a patient is legally using cannabis for a medical condition? They cannot turn them away but must be aware of contraindications of treatment. It is imperative that dental care providers make clinical decisions based on scientific evidence regarding the pharmacologic and psychological effects of marijuana, not on the societal stigma associated with illegal drug use.

There is conflicting research surrounding the influence of cannabis usage on the development of certain cancers. Some research has shown a correlation between long-term cannabis use while other studies have been conducted that show there is little to no association. A study published in 2019 stated that "Oral cancer linked to cannabis usually occurs on the anterior floor of the mouth and the tongue. It is suggested that smoking cannabis may be a possible cause of tongue cancer" (7). However, another study showed no association between marijuana use and oral squamous cell carcinoma after controlling for confounding factors such as sex, education, birth year, alcohol consumption, and cigarette smoking.

Further research will need to be conducted to determine what links between cannabis and cancer there are if any.

What if a patient uses marijuana prior to coming to their dental appointment? How does a dental practitioner handle a patient who is under the influence? Some users only use marijuana occasionally during social events or on the weekends while others are chronic users, consuming marijuana heavily. They may consume cannabis prior to their appointment, and their provider will need to know how to proceed with treatment. Researchers from the University of Pacific voiced concern that "due to the mind-altering implications of being under the influence of marijuana, obtaining informed consent from high patients is high risk for misunderstandings and mismanagement." (8) There are several reasons why receiving informed consent is vital for every dental appointment.

The mainstay of informed consent is a continuing process whereby the patient is given enough information to allow them to take a decision voluntarily and without coercion. They need to be given explanations (in appropriate language and terminology) to allow them to understand the nature of their condition, the nature of the proposed treatment and other alternatives, their benefits and the risks, and the consequences if no action is taken. It must also be ensured that the patient has the capacity to consent.

With the increased usage of marijuana, it is important for the patient to be able to confide in their healthcare provider. For many people, it is easier for them to disclose that they are smoking tobacco, and some may feel that if they do disclose that they are using marijuana that they will fall into legal troubles. With the increased usage of marijuana legislation and the number of patients a provider that they are using cannabis will increase. It is important that oral healthcare providers build rapport with their patients, so they feel that they can comfortably share their practices. This information is just as important as any other information that would be added into their medical history. The patient should understand that this information will make it easier for their provider to administer a plan for the patient.

Future Research

• Additional research must be completed to determine the link between oropharynx cancer and cannabis use.

Further studies on informed consent and ethics must be reviewed and considered when treating medical marijuana users.

References
10. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6056842/