

Cannabis medicines research

There is growing interest in the community regarding the potential for cannabis medicines to improve the health of people living with serious conditions such as epilepsy and cancer. Medicines derived from the cannabis plant can be legally prescribed in NSW, however the evidence base for the use of cannabis medicines is generally poor. Either the cannabis medicine has not been trialled with modern forms of therapy (for example, anecdotally, cannabis may assist with chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, however, it has not been formally evaluated alongside modern evidence-based therapies such as 5HT-3 receptor antagonists or Aprepitant) or, at the time the research commenced, there were not large-scale clinical trials reporting on efficacy (as in paediatric epilepsy). In the area of palliative care, cannabis medicines had been largely found to be ineffective for symptom control in clinical trials, however most trials showed patients reported an improvement in quality of life.

The NSW Government is committed to developing a better understanding of the therapeutic potential of cannabis medicines. \$21 million has been invested, including \$9 million in clinical trials, and NSW Health, through the NSW Office of the Chief Health Officer, is working closely with research partners, local health districts, patients and health professionals.

Following NSW Cabinet approval for the establishment of Government sponsored clinical trials of cannabis for medical conditions in NSW, the Chief Health Officer drew together an Expert Panel in 2014 to identify the areas of research where a NSW Government investment would assist in developing the evidence base. Three areas were chosen: paediatric epilepsy, chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, and palliative care for patients with advanced cancer. The Sydney Children's Hospital Network was asked to lead the research into paediatric epilepsy. An expression of interest process was followed to identify researchers interested in leading research into palliative care and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting.

Clinical trials are now underway for all three conditions, having commenced from 2015. Clinical trials do take time, and in the meantime NSW residents are able to access cannabis medicines through normal channels for unregistered medicines. Research will help:

- develop the evidence for listing on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods
- develop the evidence for funding for cannabis medicines through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
- familiarise clinicians and patients with the use of cannabis medicines.

The trial recruitment will continue until enough participants to allow the data to be analysed have enrolled or until a safety signal suggests that recruitment should not continue. NSW remains an international destination of choice for companies wishing to trial cannabis medicines due to the regulatory frameworks permitting such trials, the quality of researchers and the quality of clinical services.

The NSW Ministry of Health has administered the NSW Therapeutic Cannabis/Cannabinoid Trials. This is an example of *Population Health Research Strategy 1.1 (Generation of research: Focus on NSW Health priorities)*, pertaining to NSW Health Strategic Priorities to *Provide world-class clinical care (Strategy 2)* and *Support and harness health and medical research and innovation (Strategy 5)*.

Further reading

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