

Painaustralia's
Statement to the
Parliamentary Friends
of Pain Management on
medicinal cannabis

More than 3.37 million Australians¹ understand the day-to-day reality of living with chronic pain. It can be debilitating, life-altering, and relentless.

All Australians with chronic pain should have access to the best possible treatment options and care, for their pain, as determined with their clinician. This may include medicinal cannabis if a clinician, together with their patient, believes it will provide benefit. Further clinical research is needed to establish an evidence base for the use of medicinal cannabis across the spectrum of pain conditions.

THE NEED FOR PAIN SOLUTIONS

For Australians living with chronic pain, their condition can cause social and financial exclusion, and deeply affect their capacity to work, their mental health and their wellbeing as well as their quality of life, and that of their loved ones.

They often face significant barriers in accessing the multidisciplinary care considered best practice; only one in every 100 Australians who need it currently has access to the multidisciplinary care they need to manage their pain effectively. Multidisciplinary care addresses the physical, psychological and environmental or social factors that contribute to pain experienced and includes access to physiotherapy, psychological or psychiatric services, allied health professionals and pharmacists.

As a result, Australians with chronic pain are seeking alternatives and community expectations regarding the use of medicinal cannabis to treat their pain is growing; a recent survey of our 454 members revealed 85 per cent support the use of medicinal cannabis for pain management.² This number is likely to increase as recent changes to limit access to prescribed opioids will inevitably lead to Australians living with chronic pain searching for effective alternatives.

WHAT IS MEDICINAL CANNABIS?

Medicinal Cannabis is produced from an extract of the cannabis plant. Cannabis contains chemicals called cannabinoids, which is shown to relieve symptoms of disease.³ These cannabinoids act on receptors within our brain and other parts of the body by mimicking naturally occurring cannabinoids (called 'endocannabinoids'). Our endocannabinoid system affects physiological processes such as those governing our appetite, sleep, memory, pain and inflammation. There are more than 100 medicinal cannabis products in Australia with varying levels of the psychoactive chemical – THC or tetrahydrocannabinol. The products come in several forms including pills, oils, gels or creams, patches, or nasal sprays.

ACCESS TO MEDICINAL CANNABIS IN AUSTRALIA

Patients continue to be frustrated by the hurdles they must jump over to gain access to medicinal cannabis. Australia has taken steps in the right direction, but more needs to be done.

Medicinal cannabis is a therapeutic good, which means it is regulated to ensure it is safe for those Australians for whom it is prescribed. While there is access through the TGA's Special Access Scheme, we acknowledge concerns among healthcare professionals – those in hospitals, primary care and multidisciplinary pain services – who may not be prepared to prescribe based on current clinical evidence or have concerns regarding the consequences of medium to long term use. GPs have indicated that they want more education about the available products or access pathways. This must be provided. We must also ensure that clinicians are given all the support they need to make clinical decisions about the potential benefits of medicinal cannabis for their patients.

THE EVIDENCE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT THE USE OF MEDICINAL CANNABIS

Medicinal cannabis is emerging as a possible treatment option for chronic pain. Substantial anecdotal evidence from patients who have benefitted from medicinal cannabis is emerging, and these stories offer hope to others. There are also stories from those who have not had the result they were after.

A recent review of all clinical evidence available to support the use of medicinal cannabis, completed for the Australian Government by the Universities of New South Wales, Sydney and Queensland under the co-ordination of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, found the clinical evidence to support the use of medicinal cannabis in chronic pain remains limited.⁴

There is some evidence that medicinal cannabis can reduce neuropathic pain (nerve pain), but the reduction in pain may be small. Clinical evidence to support medicinal cannabis use to improve overall quality of life, physical functioning or better sleep is also limited.⁴

Robust clinical evidence is critical to enhance the confidence of patients, clinicians and policy makers in the use of medicinal cannabis to treat chronic pain. Ultimately, we must ensure a product does what it says it will do for those desperately looking to benefit from treatment.

Australia has a world-leading assessment process to determine that a treatment is safe and effective. To meet this standard, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is calling for research on medicinal cannabis that:

- Increases the amount and quality of clinical evidence to support the use of medicinal cannabis as an approved treatment.
- Gives a more detailed understanding of the effectiveness of cannabis products, doses and how they are administered;
- Compares medicinal cannabis with other options currently used to treat various conditions; and
- Builds a strong knowledge base on how medicinal cannabis interacts with other therapies.⁴

The recently established Australian Centre for Cannabinoid Clinical and Research Excellence is a world-first here in Australia to coordinate research into medicinal cannabis use. With a \$2.5 million grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council, it will help explore the evidence required to guide doctors on medicinal cannabis products and ensure dosages that are safe and effective.

This is a step in the right direction, but we call on the industry to do more to fund larger, high-quality clinical trials, including here in Australia, to improve this evidence base and facilitate patient access.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR PATIENTS AND CLINICIANS

Like the management of any condition, clinicians and patients must consider several key elements in their decision-making process to determine the right course of treatment. These include potential benefits and unwelcome side effects, as well as how treatments might interact with other treatments or health conditions. For Australians living with chronic pain, this is particularly critical because many also live with other conditions: depression, sleep disturbance, fatigue and other chronic health issues.¹

Where medicinal cannabis is prescribed, we encourage clinicians and patients to regularly check in to monitor effectiveness and any side effects, and to check that use remains appropriate.

OUR COMMITMENT TO AUSTRALIANS LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

Painaustralia will:

- Support Australians living with pain, their families and carers.
- Provide information that raises awareness and understanding of treatment options.
- Work with professional bodies to educate healthcare professionals on the use of medicinal cannabis and other therapeutics as part of a multidisciplinary approach to the management of chronic pain.
- Advocate for further research to strengthen the evidence base that supports the use of medicinal cannabis as a pain relief for chronic pain.
- Advocate for enhanced access to multidisciplinary pain services with Federal, State and Territory Governments to ensure Australians living with chronic pain can access the care they deserve.

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1. Deloitte (2019). The Cost of Pain in Australia. Accessed at: www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/economics/articles/cost-pain-australia.html [Nov 2020]
 2. Painaustralia. eNews. Accessed at: www.painaustralia.org.au/media/newsletters/issue-75/medicinal-cannabis-survey-highlights-need-for-more-support-for-people-in-pain [Nov 2020]
 3. Health Direct. Medicinal Cannabis. Accessed at: www.healthdirect.gov.au/medicinal-cannabis [Nov 2020]
 4. Therapeutic Goods Administration. Guidance for the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia: Patient information. Accessed at www.tga.gov.au/publication/guidance-use-medicinal-cannabis-australia-patient-information [Nov 2020]