

# Cannabis To Treat Opiate Use Disorders:

- **Scott Bienenfeld, M.D.**

The opioid epidemic has reached catastrophic level in the United States, and for the first time in history, the chances are greater that a person will die due to a drug overdose than a motor vehicle accident. Drug overdose is now the leading cause of accidental death in the United States. In 2015, there were 55,403 lethal drug overdoses, that's over 150 deaths per day! <sup>1</sup>

The main culprit behind the drug overdose problem continues to be the Opiate class of medication which includes painkillers (Percocet, Vicodin, Morphine, Codeine, Dilaudid, etc...) and also heroin. As the DEA tightens restrictions on the availability of prescription painkillers, huge numbers of people addicted to them switch to the cheaper, stronger and widely available drug, heroin. Many progress to the point where they use intravenously. A survey in 2014 revealed that 94% of respondents acknowledged switching from painkillers to heroin because opioids were "far more expensive and harder to obtain."<sup>2</sup>

Treatment outcomes for opiate addicts are particularly abominable. Relapse rates following treatment are upwards of 80-90%, and may be even higher for those who inject.<sup>3</sup> Though AA zealots and advocates for 12-step programs may disagree, the traditional recovery models that help some alcoholics, fail miserably for opiate addicts.

An innovative, harm-reduction approach to addressing the problem of opiate addiction is the use of Medical Marijuana (Cannabis). Recent studies show that the use of medical cannabis is associated with a statistically significant drop in opioid overdose rates in states where it is legal.<sup>4</sup> Also, Cannabis can drastically reduce the amount of opioid pain medication

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Underlying Cause of Death 1999-2015 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released December, 2016. Data are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 1999-2015, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero TJ, Ellis MS, Surratt HL, Kurtz SP. The changing face of heroin use in the United States: a retrospective analysis of the past 50 years. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2014;71(7):821-826.

<sup>3</sup> *Ir Med J*. 2010 Jun;103(6):176-9.  
Lapse and relapse following inpatient treatment of opiate dependence.  
Smyth BP1, Barry J, Keenan E, Ducray K.

<sup>4</sup> Bachhuber, Marcus A., Brendan Saloner, Chinazo O. Cunningham, and Colleen L. Barry. "Medical cannabis laws and opioid analgesic overdose mortality in the United States, 1999-2010." *JAMA internal medicine* 174, no. 10 (2014): 1668-1673.

patients require.<sup>5</sup> Cannabidiol, an active ingredient in Marijuana, has been shown to be useful as a treatment for Cannabis Withdrawal Syndrome,<sup>6</sup> and studies have found that concurrent use of Cannabis during Methadone induction reduce the patient's subjective feelings of opiate withdrawal.<sup>7</sup> A study in 2013 found that in laboratory rats, high-dose cannabidiol inhibited the reward effects of morphine.<sup>8</sup> In Massachusetts, doctors are now using Medical Marijuana to treat opiate addicted patients with extremely promising results.<sup>9</sup>

The bottom line is that while some people can successfully stop using opiates with traditional treatment modalities, most cannot, and many die. As described above, studies clearly link the use of medical Marijuana with both decreases in opioid related deaths and reduction in the use of painkiller medication,<sup>10</sup> and current research is looking at how best to utilize medical marijuana for the treatment of opioid dependent patients. The goal of the treatment is to get patients out of the "danger zone" -- in other words, off of lethal drugs, and onto something that is not fatal in overdose i.e. Cannabis.

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<sup>5</sup> Medical Cannabis Use Is Associated With Decreased Opiate Medication Use in a Retrospective Cross-Sectional Survey of Patients With Chronic Pain - Kevin F. Boehnke, Evangelos Litinas, Daniel J. Clauw. *Journal of Pain*, June 2016 Volume 17, Issue 6, Pages 739-744

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<sup>6</sup> *J Clin Pharm Ther.* 2013 Apr;38(2):162-4. doi: 10.1111/jcpt.12018. Epub 2012 Oct 24. Cannabidiol for the treatment of cannabis withdrawal syndrome: a case report. Crippa JA1, Hallak JE, Machado-de-Sousa JP, Queiroz RH, Bergamaschi M, Chagas MH, Zuardi AW.

<sup>7</sup>*Am J Addict.* 2013 Jul-Aug;22(4):344-51. doi: 10.1111/j.1521-0391.2013.12044.x. Impact of cannabis use during stabilization on methadone maintenance treatment. Scavone JL1, Sterling RC, Weinstein SP, Van Bockstaele EJ.

<sup>8</sup> *Addict Biol.* 2013 Mar;18(2):286-96. doi: 10.1111/j.1369-1600.2012.00483.x. Epub 2012 Aug 2. Cannabidiol inhibits the reward-facilitating effect of morphine: involvement of 5-HT1A receptors in the dorsal raphe nucleus. Katsidoni V1, Anagnostou I, Panagis G.

<sup>9</sup> Home / Partnership News Service / Opioid Addiction Being Treated With Medical Marijuana in Massachusetts  
Opioid Addiction Being Treated With Medical Marijuana in Massachusetts. <http://www.drugfree.org/news-service/opioid-addiction-treated-medical-marijuana-massachusetts/>

<sup>10</sup> The Effect of Medicinal Cannabis on Pain and Quality of Life Outcomes in Chronic Pain: A Prospective Open-label Study. *Clin J Pain.* 2016 Feb 17. Haroutounian S1, Ratz Y, Ginosar Y, Furmanov K, Saifi F, Meidan R, Davidson E.