Medical Marijuana

The University of California’s Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research is a collaboration between UC San Diego and UC San Francisco that coordinates the submission, review, and funding of proposals from statewide research institutions for the conduct of clinical trials of medicinal cannabis. The Center is directed by Igor Grant, MD, professor of psychiatry at UCSD and executive vice chair of the department of psychiatry as well as director of UCSD’s HIV Neurobehavioral Research Center.

Although people may commonly associate the founding of the Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research (CMCR) with voter approval of marijuana for medicinal or compassionate use, the route to state-funded, federally sanctioned clinical trials of medicinal cannabis involved a combination of scientific discovery and discussion, political climate, and a group of investigators with the wherewithal to negotiate the rigorous cycle of local, state, and federal reviews and requirements.

Many physicians have heard anecdotal reports of the benefits of marijuana, though peer-reviewed publications demonstrating its therapeutic utility are less readily available. CMCR studies are intended to begin to fill this gap by investigating marijuana’s purported clinical benefits and by providing safety and efficacy data on the use of cannabis for specific medical conditions. Recall that California voters approved pharmaceutical use of cannabis in 1996 with the passage of Proposition 215, although the exact role the substance should play in patient care remains ambiguous, and many voters and lawmakers were skeptical that “compassionate use” might become a synonym for legalization. Fortunately, the legislature and governor of California had the foresight to see that future policy on medicinal cannabis would be best informed by medical fact rather than unsubstantiated opinion, and in 1999, Senate Bill 847 was signed into law. Authored by State Senator John Vasconcellos, SB 847 called for a three-year program overseeing objective, high quality medical research that would “…enhance understanding of the efficacy and adverse effects of marijuana as a pharmacological agent,” stressing that the project “should not be construed as encouraging or sanctioning the social or recreational use of marijuana.”

**SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND**

Much of the research in human subjects currently underway has only become possible very recently. In the last 20 years, scientific research has uncovered receptors for cannabis compounds in the brain and other tissues, and, more recently, the body’s inbuilt [endogenous] signaling molecules that activate this endocannabinoid system have been characterized. For example, the endocannabinoid system is probably involved in central nervous system excitability, movement, analgesia, neuroprotection, and feeding behaviors, including newborn suckling. These new scientific insights have been pivotal in stimulating greater interest in both basic and clinical research on cannabis and related compounds.

In parallel with scientific progress in the characterization of endogenous cannabinoids and their receptors, several national meetings have convened to re-examine possible medical uses of marijuana. The first of these was the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “Workshop on the Medical Utility of Marijuana” in 1997, followed by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) conference on “Marijuana and Medicine: Assessing the Science Base,” and later the 2001 National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) “Workshop on Clinical Consequences of Marijuana.” Reports from these meetings converged on the need for carefully controlled clinical trials of marijuana to evaluate its potential utility in the specific therapeutic areas of severe appetite suppression, weight loss, and cachexia due to HIV; chronic pain, particularly neuropathic pain; severe nausea and vomiting associated with cancer and its treatment; and severe muscle spasticity caused by diseases such as multiple sclerosis.

**CMCR APPLICATION AND REVIEW PROCESS**

The CMCR issued its first call for proposals in fall 2000 and currently funds eight clinical and three pre-clinical studies throughout California. In order to evaluate the scientific validity of the proposals submitted, the CMCR engages senior scientists from around the country to serve as a Scientific Review Board. Studies recommended for funding by the Scientific Review Board are then submitted to review by the Research Advisory Panel of California (RAP-C), the Office of Public Health and Science of the federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Food and Drug...
Administration (FDA), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Upon final approval, studies are authorized to order cannabis cigarettes from NIDA and to begin recruiting patients.

Additionally, the CMCR has established a National Advisory Council (NAC) to advise and assist the Center's Directorate in meeting its objectives in the most scientifically sound, responsible and timely manner. The purpose of the NAC includes commenting on the Scientific Review Board's recommendations for funding research proposals; advising on ethical, therapeutic, and policy implications of research; assessing the quality and adequacy of the Center's research portfolio; suggesting alternate research strategies; reviewing scientific priorities; providing guidance on future directions of the Center; and commenting on the progress of the Center in terms of its accomplishments, its mission, and its objectives.

**Current Studies**

Current studies focus on the safety and efficacy of medicinal marijuana either as an alternate or adjunctive therapy to treat a variety of medical conditions. Clinical studies currently recruiting participants are listed below.

**UC San Diego**
- Dr. Jody Corey-Bloom
  “Short-term Effects of Cannabis Therapy on Spasticity in Multiple Sclerosis”
- Dr. Sean Drummond
  “Sleep and Medicinal Cannabis”
- Dr. Ronald Ellis
  “Placebo-controlled, Double-Blind Trial of Medicinal Cannabis in Painful HIV Neuropathy”
- Dr. Thomas Marcotte
  “Impact of Repeated Cannabis Treatments on Driving Abilities”
- Dr. Mark Wallace
  “Analogesic Efficacy of Smoked Cannabis”

**UC San Francisco**
- Dr. Donald Abrams
  “Cannabis for Treatment of HIV-Related Peripheral Neuropathy” & “Cannabis in Combination with Opioids for Cancer Pain”

**San Mateo County**
- Dr. Dennis Israelski
  “Medical Marijuana for HIV-Associated Distal Sensory Poly Neuropathy: Adherence & Compliance Sub-study”

**Recent Developments**

In addition to clinical trials of medicinal cannabis, the Center also strives to facilitate discussion among leading researchers in the field of cannabinoid science. In July 2002, the CMCR held a one-day workshop entitled “Future Directions in Cannabinoid Therapeutics” featuring presentations by internationally acclaimed leaders in the field, detailing both currently known as well as theoretical functions of endogenous cannabinoids. Potential alternative modes of cannabis delivery were also discussed and remain an area of future exploration for the CMCR.

The CMCR issued its fourth call for proposals in December 2002, with a submission deadline of April 1, 2003. Information pertaining to the current call as well as links to the referenced marijuana reports and details on the Center and current studies is available on the CMCR web site at www.cmcr.ucsd.edu.

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