

Study reveals global first for cannabis withdrawal

Wednesday, 15 January 2014 – A successful, world-first study led by a group in Sydney, Australia at the National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) has revealed a break-through for dependent cannabis users, using a cannabis-based medication, Sativex (nabiximols) that has been shown to provide significant relief from withdrawal symptoms.

“As medical and recreational cannabis becomes more available and use increases around the world, more people are seeking treatment to help them quit. One in ten people who try cannabis go on to become dependent and it is surprising that there is no approved medication to alleviate symptoms of withdrawal. The success of this study offers considerable hope for those struggling to get through a cannabis withdrawal and remain abstinent into the future” said Professor Jan Copeland, Director of NCPIC and Chief Investigator of the study.

She noted that “one of the greatest barriers to quitting cannabis is withdrawal and while symptoms aren’t life-threatening, they are of a severity level that causes marked distress. For many people, symptoms including irritability, depression, cannabis cravings and sleep problems can overcome their strong desire to quit and they find themselves using again to feel better.”

The study was conducted at two inpatient services in New South Wales where participants stayed in hospital up to 8 days. The findings revealed that patients treated with Sativex stayed in treatment longer, and experienced a shorter and milder withdrawal than patients receiving placebo.

Administered as an oral spray, Sativex is licensed in many countries for the treatment of spasticity and pain in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) patients when other medications have failed. The spray contains the cannabis extracts, cannabidiol (CBD) and delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which is the compound primarily responsible for the psychoactive effects of cannabis.

Professor Alan Budney from the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth is a world renowned expert in cannabis withdrawal and its management and said that “this study is an important first step in the development of an approved medication that will reduce symptoms of cannabis withdrawal and improve the probability that cannabis quit attempts will be successful. Because the difficulty in quitting cannabis for those that are addicted rivals that of other substances of abuse, groups around the world will be interested in building on this work that uses a pharmaceutical quality cannabis product to alleviate cannabis withdrawal, just as we currently have nicotine replacement therapy to help people stop tobacco smoking

The lead author of the paper and study investigator Dr David Allsop says that “while most people who use cannabis do not become dependent, those who use regularly or for an extended period run that risk. Sativex is not licensed or available for treating cannabis users at this time. Our hope is that this study will lead to further research, and possibly approval for use as a treatment for people experiencing problematic cannabis use.”

The full findings of this study have been published in international psychiatry journal, *JAMA Psychiatry*, and can be accessed here xxx

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