

Aussie cannabis users found to self-medicate

September 3 2014, by Michelle Wheeler



Prof Lenton says cannabis use has been shown to be a risk factor for people with mental health problems. Image: Prensa 420

One in two Australians who grow cannabis for medicinal reasons are doing so without speaking to their doctor, according to responses from cannabis growers to an international survey.

The study, involving six countries including Australia, found that 50 per cent of the 175 Australian respondents who said they grew cannabis for medical reasons had not discussed it with their doctor.

In 23 per cent of cases growers reported that a doctor suggested they use the drug while 13 per cent of respondents said their doctor either refused to recommend or advised against cannabis use.

Almost one in 10 people reported that their doctor was aware of their cannabis use and did not object.

National Drug Research Institute deputy director Simon Lenton, who co-authored the study, says people are reluctant to admit to anybody that they are treating themselves with cannabis, particularly in countries where there are no legal methods of accessing the drug.

"Obviously cannabis use is illegal in this country as it is in many others and currently there isn't a system for cannabis being prescribed to people for treatment of a medical condition," he says.

"So there's a real taboo I think at both ends—from the patient's point of view but also from the doctor's point of view, about raising the issue and having an open discussion."

More open-mindedness needed

Professor Lenton, who is based at Curtin University, says it is important for [doctors](#) to be able to consider potential adverse effects of cannabis, the impact on other medication and a person's health generally.

"If there isn't an environment in which those things can be discussed, then that's to the detriment of the patient and makes it difficult for the treating physician," he says.

Prof Lenton says cannabis use has been shown to be a risk factor for people with [mental health problems](#).

However, the Australian medicinal cannabis growers reported they most often used the [drug](#) to self-medicate depression and other mood disorders (47 per cent) and anxiety or panic disorders (45 per cent).

The study is set to be published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* and is the first of six papers based on a web survey comparing 6521 cannabis growers across 11 countries.

Professor Lenton says that although they can't be certain that the results are representative of [cannabis](#) growers in general, there was a lot of consistency in the responses across the different countries despite the different laws that apply.

More information: Pekka Hakkarainen, Vibeke Asmussen Frank, Monica J. Barratt, Helle Vibeke Dahl, Tom Decorte, Karoliina Karjalainen, Simon Lenton, Gary Potter, Bernd Wense, "Growing medicine: Small-scale cannabis cultivation for medical purposes in six different countries," *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Available online 21 July 2014, ISSN 0955-3959, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.07.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.07.005).

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