

Illinois extends marijuana experiment to children

January 2 2015, by Carla K. Johnson



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Nicole Gross uses an oral syringe to give her son Chase his daily dose of a medical marijuana oil, known as Charlotte's Web, at their home in Colorado Springs, Colo. They moved to Colorado from Chicago about a year ago to legally treat Chase, who used to have hundreds of seizures per day. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

Randy Gross hopes a new law allowing children into Illinois' medical marijuana program will reunite his family, nearly a year after his wife moved to Colorado so their son could receive a controversial treatment

to ease his epileptic seizures.

Gross lives and works in Illinois. His wife, Nicole, moved with their two sons so their 8-year-old could legally swallow a quarter-teaspoon of marijuana oil each day. While the medical evidence is thin, some parents—including the Grosses—say marijuana works for their children and they're willing to experiment.

"We can tell he's feeling better," Nicole Gross said of their son, Chase, who also has autism and uses sign language. "He puts four or five signs together. He'll sign, 'brother go downstairs play.' ... He engages more, makes better eye contact. If he notices something funny on his TV show, he'll clap and pat you on the back."

The boy formerly suffered abrupt "head drop" seizures—at least one every two minutes, she said. Now 20 minutes go by, sometimes 30 minutes, between seizures, she said.

The dark green, pungent oil comes from a hybrid marijuana strain called Charlotte's Web, which was cultivated by a Colorado company to be heavy in a compound called CBD and low in THC, the ingredient that gets people high. It hasn't been tested in clinical trials for effectiveness or safety, but it will be legal in Illinois under a law that took effect Thursday.

Sorting truth from hype is difficult. CBD shows enough promise that two drug companies are studying it for childhood seizures with support from U.S. regulators, but those results will take years. For now, mainstream medicine regards Charlotte's Web as a folk remedy deserving of caution.

"There is good evidence of long-term harm of chronic marijuana use on the developing brain under 18 years of age," said Dr. Leslie Mendoza

Temple, a suburban Chicago doctor who has given accredited lectures about medical marijuana for the Illinois Academy of Family Physicians.



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Nichole Gross and her husband, Randy, follow Chase, their epileptic eight-year-old son, as he walks through their home in Colorado Springs., Colo. Nichole moved her son to Colorado from Chicago about a year ago so they could legally treat him using a low-THC, high-CBD medical marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. Randy continues to work in Chicago and comes to Colorado as often as he can. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

She considers the scientific evidence sparse, so "in general, this is a medicine only to be considered when all other therapies have been exhausted and failed, and if the child is quite debilitated."

A wave of Charlotte's Web publicity, sparked by a 2013 CNN documentary, lured families to Colorado and unfairly played on their

desperation, said Dr. Kevin Chapman, who treats children with epilepsy at Children's Hospital Colorado. Chapman has seen only inconsistent parent accounts that Charlotte's Web works.

When he and his colleagues reviewed the charts of 58 young patients using the oil, they found less than a third of parents reported a big reduction in seizures, and the improvement didn't show up on available before-and-after tests that measure brain waves. Families who moved to Colorado to use the drug, however, were three times more likely to report improvement than families already living in the state.

"Families have to move, sell everything, pack up, leave their social network," Chapman said. "It's hard to be truly objective if you've had to do so much to get this drug that's been touted as a miracle medication."

Under emergency rules, the Illinois Department of Public Health announced in December, young patients will be able to use medical marijuana for any of the nearly 40 health conditions already authorized for adults, although some—like agitation of Alzheimer's disease—aren't childhood conditions.

Children will be required to get written certification from two doctors. Adult patients need just one doctor to sign off.



In this Jan. 1, 2015 photo, parents Randy and Nicole Gross watch their epileptic eight-year-old son Chase play on his iPad, in Colorado Springs., Colo. Nichole moved her son to Colorado from Chicago about a year ago so they could legally treat Chase using a low-THC, high-CBD medical marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. Randy continues to work in Chicago and comes to Colorado as often as he can. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

Illinois doctors will be reluctant to sign children's forms, and for good reason, said Dr. Joel E. Frader, a Northwestern University bioethicist and palliative care pediatrician at Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago. Signing means a doctor believes there will be a therapeutic benefit that outweighs the risks.

"I know there are a lot of parents who feel desperate, and my heart certainly goes out to them," Frader said. "In Illinois, there has been pressure put on the state Legislature and the regulatory process to increase the scope of use for medical marijuana by families who look at

this as their last hope."

No legal marijuana has yet been grown in Illinois yet. Potential growers waiting to learn whether they've been granted permits must build secure facilities before they can plant the first crop. That means it may be summer before marijuana oil is available in Illinois.



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Nichole Gross and her husband, Randy, watch their as their sons Chase, center, and Zach, play at their home in Colorado Springs, Colo. Nichole moved Chase, who is epileptic, to Colorado from Chicago about a year ago so they could legally treat him using a marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

Randy Gross, who works as a chief information officer for a trade group, hopes to bring his wife and sons back home. He tries to spend two weeks each month with them in Colorado. It's been difficult for the

family, particularly his 10-year-old son, Zach.

"I missed his first karate tournament. I missed my wife's birthday and Valentine's Day," he said. "It's the little things like that."



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Nicole Gross gives her son Chase a bowl of blueberries as he plays on his iPad, at their home in Colorado Springs, Colo. Nicole and Chase moved to Colorado from Chicago about a year ago to legally treat Chase, who is epileptic, using a medical marijuana oil, known as Charlotte's Web. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)



In this Jan. 1, 2015 photo, Nicole Gross watches her epileptic eight-year-old son Chase eat popcorn as he watches a cartoon on his iPad, at their home in Colorado Springs., Colo. Nicole and Chase moved to Colorado from Chicago about a year ago to legally treat Chase using a low-THC, high CBD medical marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. Nicole's husband, Randy, continues to work in Chicago but comes to Colorado as often as he can. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Nichole Gross plays with her son Chase, who is autistic and epileptic, at their home in Colorado Springs, Colo. Chase was moved from Chicago to Colorado so he could legally access a medical marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Randy Gross plays with his son Chase, who is autistic and epileptic, at their home in Colorado Springs, Colo. Chase was moved from Chicago to Colorado so he could legally access a medical marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)



In this Jan. 1, 2015, photo, Zach Gross, left, plays with his brother, Chase, at their home in Colorado Springs, Colo. The brothers moved to Colorado from Chicago with their mother, Nichole Gross, to legally treat Chase, who is epileptic, with a marijuana oil known as Charlotte's Web. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

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