Vermont medical school delves into marijuana science
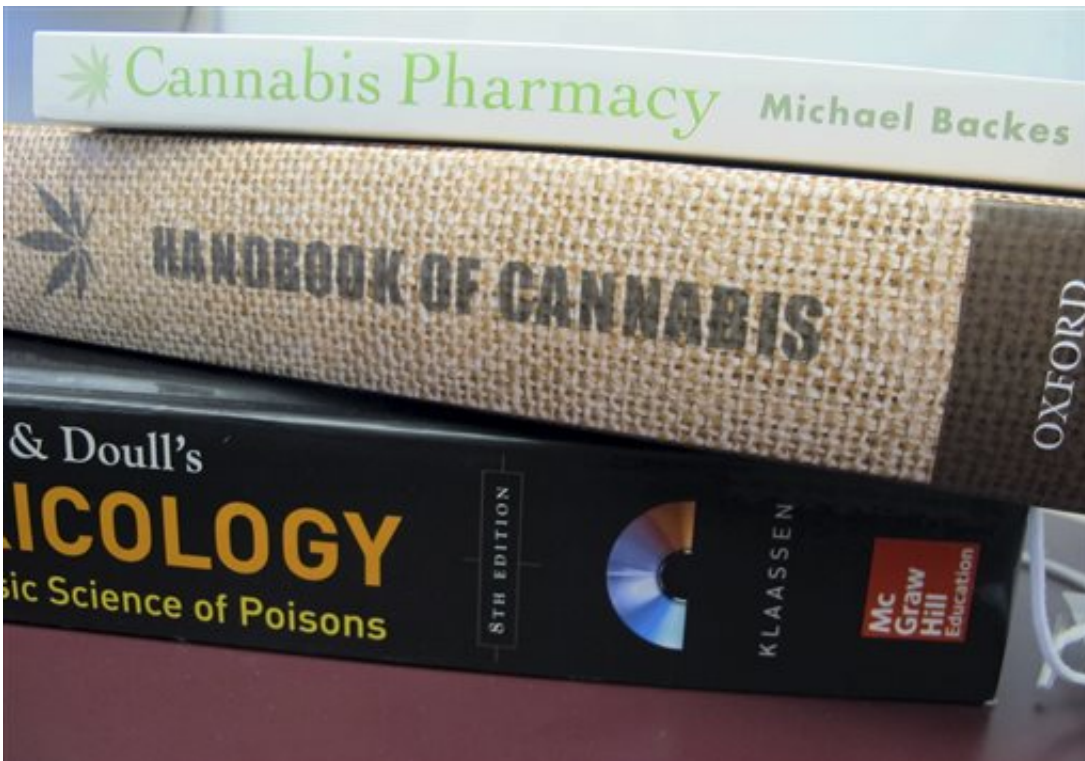
December 9 2015, byLisa Rathke

In this Dec. 4, 2015 photo, books about marijuana lay on a table in the office of University of Vermont pharmacology professor Wolfgang Dostmann in Burlington, Vt. The College of Medicine is offering a new class on the science of medical marijuana. UVM is one of the first accredited academic programs in the country to offer a pharmacology class on medical cannabis. Professors said they are hampered by a lack of research on the topic. (AP Photo/Lisa Rathke)

As more states allow for the use of medical marijuana, the University of

Vermont is offering a course in the science of the drug—and the professors say they are challenged by a lack of research on what has long been a taboo topic.

Other institutions have offered classes in marijuana law and policy, but the university's medical school is likely the country's first to offer a full course on medical cannabis, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges and Universities. Other medical schools have touched on the topic.

"What we're trying to do with this course is to sort of demystify this whole subject matter, to try to treat this like any other drug, like alcohol or amphetamines or opioids," said Vermont pharmacology professor Wolfgang Dostmann. "Just demystify the whole thing and say what it is, what is going on with it, how does it work."

Twenty three-states, including Vermont, allow the use of medical cannabis for a range of conditions or symptoms from glaucoma to HIV and cancer, although the drug is still illegal under federal law.

The Massachusetts Medical Society, an accredited institution, is offering online medical marijuana courses including one on pharmacology, but it's also limited because of the lack of research on the topic.

Medical cannabis is clearly a hot topic. Nearly 90 graduate and undergraduate students have signed up for the Vermont class, which is to start in the spring, forcing the professors to expand the classroom twice. The class is also open to the general public, allowing members of the Legislature, or those in law enforcement or medicine, to attend.

Alice Peng, a pharmacology graduate student who plans to go medical school, signed up because she's interested in the potential for marijuana to treat pain.

In this Dec. 4, 2015 photo, University of Vermont pharmacology professor Karen Lounsbury talks about a new class on the science of medical marijuana to be offered at the school in Burlington, Vt. UVM's College of Medicine is one of the first accredited academic programs in the country to offer a pharmacology class on medical cannabis. Professors said they are hampered by a lack of research on the topic. (AP Photo/Lisa Rathke)

"I also do work in the cancer center in the hospital, and so I see a lot of cancer patients, and I would be really interested in seeing how it would help their chronic pain," she said.
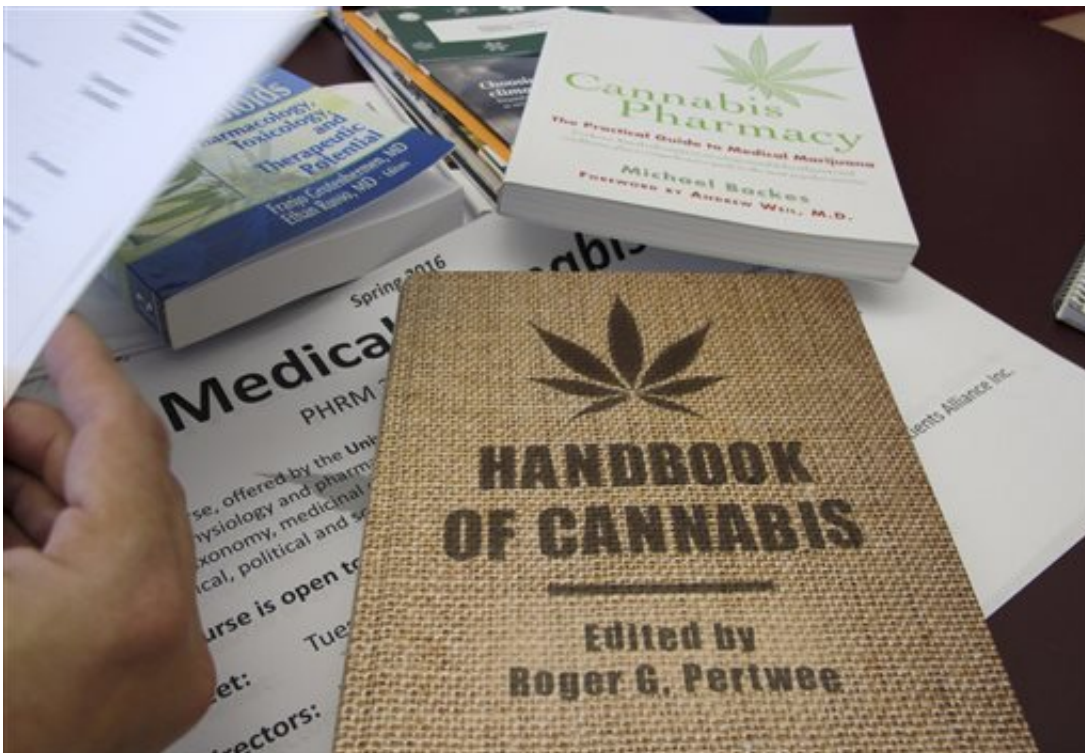
But the professors say they are hampered by a lack of access to high-quality research.

"There's so much information out there that's just hearsay," said Vermont pharmacology professor Karen Lounsbury.

The course will cover cannabis taxonomy; medical chemistry of cannabinoids, the chemicals found in marijuana; physiological effects of the drug; emerging therapeutic applications; and the historical, political and socioeconomic influences on marijuana legislation.

Dostmann, whose expertise is in pharmacokinetics, or how a drug works in the body, and Lounsbury, who focuses on the body's physiological and biological response to a drug, will teach some of the course.

Students will also benefit from what's happening with marijuana in Vermont.

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A university research affiliate and head of a Vermont medical marijuana dispensary will discuss the plant's biology. An associate business professor who is part of a Vermont think tank working to develop technology to research uses of medical marijuana products will talk about economic impacts.

Students may also visit the Legislature, which is expected to discuss legalizing marijuana for recreational use.

Books exist on the science of marijuana, but they also cover topics like how to clean pipes or cook with the plant, not what the university wants to teach students. So Lounsbury and Dostmann plan to write their own textbook for future studies.

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And if the class attracts stoners, the professors hope it will motivate them to study pharmacology. Above all, they hope they can raise awareness about a potentially useful drug.

"Without having enough clinical trials," Lounsbury said, "we won't really know whether this is applicable or whether it is a snake oil."

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