

Medicinal Cannabis—harms or benefits?

Who decides?

21 December 2016

Wellington researchers are calling for doctors to be more involved in the debate around cannabis as a medicine.

In a recent article in the *New Zealand Medical Journal*, Dr Giles Newton-Howes, from the University of Otago, Wellington, and Dr Sam McBride, from the Capital & Coast District Health Board, say that although [cannabis](#) has a long history of medicinal use, the current evidence is mixed and relatively weak.

They note though that the harms of cannabis have been well identified, and say this raises concerns about cannabis as a medication and demonstrates the importance of it undergoing the usual regulatory process for medicines.

"There is evidence around the harms and problems of using cannabis but the evidence of its effectiveness as a medicine is weak," says Dr Giles Newton-Howes, from the Department of Psychological Medicine at the University of Otago, Wellington.

"There are also added complexities with the use of cannabis as it is illicit. We believe [doctors](#), i.e. the people who will be asked to prescribe this medication, need to be more engaged in the discussion of medicinal cannabis to move the debate forward," says Dr Newton-Howes.

"There has been increased interest in cannabis as a [medicine](#) both nationally and internationally. Many countries have accepted cannabis as a medication for a variety of purposes, and this has led for calls for it to be medicalised in New Zealand," he says.

But Dr Newton-Howes says there are issues with this approach to accessing cannabis, which is why he believes doctors need to be at the forefront of the debate surround medicalised cannabis.

"If they do not engage in this debate, the medical profession will risk having to respond to requests after the fact, as opposed to helping to shape policy now. All doctors should have an interest in this, from [primary care physicians](#) to sub-specialists in neurology, psychiatry and associated fields," he says.

"We really need to separate out the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes and recreational purposes," says Dr Newton-Howes. If clinicians are not engaged in this debate now, we cannot influence the direction the use of cannabis will go in.

Provided by University of Otago

APA citation: Medicinal Cannabis—harms or benefits? Who decides? (2016, December 21) retrieved 15 October 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-medicinal-cannabisharms-benefits.html>

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