Medicinal Cannabis—harms or benefits?
Who decides?
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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.