

UCLA researcher aims to study societal impacts of cannabis

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In the 15 months since the recreational sale of marijuana became legal for adults in California, an explosion of new cannabis-based products, unchecked health claims and slick advertisements has bombarded the state.

Anticipating the accompanying social impacts, UCLA established the UCLA Cannabis Research Initiative, known as the CRI, in 2017 as one of the first academic programs in the world dedicated to the study of marijuana. Supported by the Jane and Terry Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior and the UCLA Brain Research Institute, the CRI is led by director Dr. Jeff Chen and brings together more than 15 departments across UCLA to explore cannabis' effect on society, including legal, economic, health and other social impacts.

In January, Ziva Cooper joined the CRI as its first research director, where she will primarily lead the examinations into the health effects of cannabis. Recently, Cooper discussed her work, the research goals of the project and the impact of California's new marijuana laws.

What attracted you to this field of cannabis

research in the first place?

As an undergraduate and a graduate student at the University of Michigan, my work focused on preclinical pharmacology of opioids. I studied both the therapeutic effects of opioids, such as pain relief, and the negative effects, such as abuse and addiction. When I started my postdoctoral fellowship in 2007 at Columbia University, I was introduced to one of my mentors, Dr. Margaret Haney, a neurobiologist who had been studying cannabis for about 15 years. She shared interesting findings that weren't obvious to me at the time. For example, even though THC, the primary psychoactive component of cannabis, was isolated in the 1960s, and great strides have been made in our understanding of the pharmacology of THC, we actually knew very little about the plant or about our body's natural endocannabinoid system.

What made you decide to come to UCLA to continue your research?

For the last 10 years, I've focused my work on studying both the therapeutic and adverse effects of cannabis and [cannabinoids](#). Cannabinoids are the chemical constituents that are unique to the cannabis plant. My research has involved both animal models and clinical studies in humans. Los Angeles has swiftly become the epicenter for a cultural revolution in the United States related to the use of cannabis and cannabis-based products, both for medicinal and personal use. Because UCLA is a top-ranked university with world leaders across disciplines, it is poised to be the hub of rigorous, impactful study of cannabis and cannabinoids.

And, of course, California passed legislation permitting adult use or recreational use of cannabis in the state.

Yes. Los Angeles has become an experiment for the United States to see what happens when we

permit the use of cannabis across the board. In Los Angeles, there is an immediate opportunity, and a public health necessity, to study the impact of cannabis on health and society.

With a population of 10 million in Los Angeles County, and with the increased availability and accessibility of cannabis across demographics, there is a need to understand the public health implications.

And some of this is true about California generally, right?

Yes, I feel like the country has had their eye on California since it became the first state to pass medical cannabis laws in 1996. Since then, there's been an acceptance or a destigmatization regarding using cannabis for its therapeutic effects.

As tourists from around the globe drive down Sunset Boulevard, they see billboards promoting an array of different industries related to cannabis speaking to a wide variety of populations. To some degree, everyone is being touched by this change in availability, accessibility, commercialization and the [legalization](#) of cannabis.

And of course, UCLA's Cannabis Research Initiative is one of the first university programs in the world dedicated to the study of cannabis, right?

Yes, the Cannabis Research Initiative is unique in that we are bringing together scholars from across the campus—scholars from the law school, public policy, public health and different areas of science and medicine. Faculty from diverse fields are putting their heads together to focus on the most critical questions that need to be answered right now, using rigorous study designs and innovative approaches.

This type of collaboration provides extraordinary possibilities for first-in-class, innovative and impactful research in areas that are in desperate need of immediate attention.

Can you summarize your role as research director of this initiative and what all of you are focused on accomplishing?

My goal as research director is to provide a path toward developing a comprehensive research program dedicated to understanding the therapeutic potential of cannabis and cannabinoids and identifying the health consequences of non-medical use, especially with the emergence of high-potency cannabis products. There are many regulatory hurdles involved with this type of work that can hamper enthusiasm. Obtaining funding for these studies can be extraordinarily difficult. I am hoping that I can be a resource to both guide research questions and strategy, and to help colleagues navigate the requirements to successfully launch projects in this area. These projects will yield data that will be instrumental in educating our communities, students, and medical professionals.

You mentioned the Sunset Boulevard billboards. But we also are seeing all types of cannabis- or cannabinoid-based products being sold, from topical treatments to vape-pens, as well as health-related claims.

What we're seeing is the market is moving faster than science. Also, public policy has moved ahead of the research. Medical cannabis laws are being enacted in the absence of data. This is precisely the reason why we need to start engaging in rigorous science to understand the implications of the proliferation and accessibility of these products, a central goal of the UCLA CRI.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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