

Medicinal cannabis: Australia isn't as progressive as it may seem



Dr Stewart Washer examines the tangled web of bureaucracy that's preventing access to medicinal cannabis

From the outside, Australia's attitude to medicinal cannabis looks quite modern. We were one of the first countries in the world to make it legal at a federal level, and its usage for treating illness has been championed by numerous patient groups and public campaigns.

And yet more than a year after legalisation, patients are still having a tough time getting their hands on medicinal cannabis products. This is despite the fact that medicinal cannabis has been used to effectively treat a variety of illnesses in Canada, the US and other countries for over half a decade.

So, what's the holdup? Turns out that while medicinal cannabis has been legalised at a federal level, doctors wanting to prescribe the substance have to undergo a complex process consisting of federal regulator approval (TGA)¹, then individual state approval for each patient, plus an endorsement by their medical college² if they want to become an authorized prescriber for medical cannabis.

As an alternative to medical college endorsement - as most colleges do not approve of medical cannabis - doctors can apply to one of Australia's national Human Research Ethics

¹ Therapeutic Goods Administration <https://www.tga.gov.au/>

² Medical association comprised of specialist colleagues

Committees (HREC). However, it is a long and expensive process as these panels were designed to approve clinical trials for testing new to world medicines, not approving doctors to prescribe medicines like cannabis.

It's no wonder that only 162 doctors and 101 patients³ have successfully completed the approval process.

This tangled web of approvals is unnecessary. Processes are certainly required, given the real potential for abuse, but the processes should be there to protect citizens, not prevent them from accessing medication they need to maintain a reasonable quality of life.

The fact is, relevant laws need to be changed to protect people who will otherwise take the law into their own hands for their own sake or the sake of their loved ones. The recent media storm around parents buying illegal cannabis oil for their children is a perfect example of this.

Parents with children who have violent outbursts due to autism, or hundreds of seizures a day because of Dravet Syndrome⁴, or chemotherapy induced nausea and weight loss, have been sharing stories of how medicinal cannabis products remedy their child's symptoms without the serious side effects of current treatment options.

Should parents and patients really have to break the law in order to access treatments that are legal and easily accessible in other countries? Where these illegal treatments could be ineffective or even unsafe?

Another key factor to consider is that doctors have traditionally been trained to consider cannabis through a negative lens. Specialists who are responsible for their patients' wellbeing consider it safer to close ranks against cannabis because, compared to other prescription medicines which are supported and promoted by large pharmaceutical companies, they are not educated on its use and potential side effects.

Medicinal cannabis has a greater safety profile than many alternatives that are currently used for treating chronic diseases including opioids for pain control. Medical professionals should be trained in the science and application of medicinal cannabis, so they can recognise when it might be an appropriate and effective solution.

It's important that medicinal cannabis is carefully introduced as a regulated and well controlled medicine, but without a restructuring of the legal framework combined with adequate training of doctors, patients will continue to needlessly suffer.

There are also a number of diseases where cannabis may play an important role as a treatment including insomnia and autism, but more clinical data is needed. The way forward from here is for companies and the government to invest in quality clinical trials so we can develop scientific data to support already extensive anecdotal evidence.

³ As of August 15th 2017 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-16/medicinal-cannabis-red-tape-government-doctors-black-market/8813962>

⁴ Severe type of epilepsy

Recently Australian listed company, Zelda Therapeutics announced an expansion of its research into the effects of medicinal cannabis on breast cancer tumours and pancreatic cancer. Over the next few months, Zelda will also spearhead clinical trials in Australia and Chile to assess cannabis as a treatment for insomnia and autism. These studies will provide enough data to allow doctors to prescribe medical cannabis as a treatment for these conditions.

We are being held back by an overly convoluted legal regulatory system that is blocking reasonable access to medicinal cannabis for Australians who need it. The process needs to be simplified to one level of clinical approval at the Federal level that is clear, simple and fast. One which allows GPs to also become authorised prescribers, not just specialists, who are very difficult for most patients to access in a reasonable timeframe.

Doctors need to be trained in medical cannabis with this training supported by their medical colleges, government and cannabis companies. This combined with a streamlined approval system will allow doctors to readily prescribe medicinal cannabis for a myriad of medical ailments including chronic pain, nausea and spasticity for patients in need.

About the author, Dr Stewart Washer, Executive Director of Zelda Therapeutics



Dr Stewart Washer is the Executive Director of listed medicinal cannabis research company, Zelda Therapeutics Ltd (ASX:ZLD).

With over 25 years of leadership experience in medical and agrifood biotech companies, Stewart can shed light on medicinal cannabis' current political and scientific landscapes, both nationally and globally.

Zelda Therapeutics draws on the expertise of its affiliated company in the USA and has garnered the support of world leading Scientists across the UK, Chile and Spain, including Complutense University professors, Manuel Guzman and Christina Sanchez.

The network of resources and specialists that the company has developed is allowing it to make ground breaking discoveries in the treatment of autism, eczema, insomnia and cancer.

Concerned by Australia's slow adoption of medicinal cannabis research, Zelda Therapeutics is an ASX-listed company that is spearheading new cannabis clinical trials in Australia and overseas.

Zelda Therapeutics brings together some of the world's leading researchers and clinicians active in the study and use of medicinal cannabis to treat a variety of ailments. By investing in rigorous research and clinical trials, they will pave the way for the use of medical cannabis to treat these diseases in Australia and the other 30 or so countries where medical cannabis is allowed.

Stewart is also Chairman of Orthocell Ltd (ASX:OCC), a regenerative medicine company, Founding Chairman and current Director of Cynata Therapeutics Ltd (ASX:CYP) who are developing global stem cell therapies, Chairman of Minomic International Ltd, and a founder and consultant to AusCann Ltd (ASX:AC8), who are rolling out cannabis medicines in Australia and Chile for chronic pain control.