

THE MEDICAL CANNABIS CLINICIANS SOCIETY

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

A GUIDE FOR UK CLINICIANS



MAY 2023



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS ABOUT CANNABIS

THE MEDICAL CANNABIS CLINICIANS SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE



DR LEON BARRON
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Since medical cannabis was legalised in the UK in November 2018, public understanding of this treatment option has significantly increased, following high profile campaigns such as access to cannabis for children with epilepsy and new treatments for patients with Multiple Sclerosis.

What does this mean for the UK's clinicians?

How should you be talking to your patients about medical cannabis? In this guide for UK clinicians, our expert committee and patients advise.



YOU HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE LIVES

My son, Alfie, lives with a very rare form of epilepsy called PCDH19 which, for him, is a non inherited gene mutation which causes severe seizure clusters, learning delay and behavioural problems.

Prior to medical cannabis treatment, he experienced more than 500 seizures a month. We tried everything, including anti-epilepsy drugs, a ketogenic diet and immunoglobulins, but the only treatment that reduced his seizures was a steroid - IV Methyl Prednisone. Its side effects include mood swings, restlessness, headaches and at worst, heart attack and organ failure.

Aged 5, Alfie was receiving up to 25 doses of steroids a month. Each time we went to hospital, we were told he would die if he kept taking steroids. I started to research epilepsy treatments and medical cannabis kept coming up.

When I asked my first neurologist about medical cannabis, he told me that he would report me to social services if I decided to give it to my son. Eventually, after changing neurologists, I was given permission to take Alfie to Holland for medical cannabis treatment.

He was prescribed Bedrolite CBD oil and after five weeks of treatment, Alfie experienced 17 days without a seizure – the longest time he had experienced without one.

Alfie's doctor was issued with a schedule one license on 19 June 2018 to enable him to prescribe the Dutch medication on the NHS. This made history. When the law changed on 1 November 2018 to allow clinicians on the GMC Specialist Register to prescribe, Alfie received the first of only two NHS prescriptions.

Alfie will always have seizures but now we can give him the quality of life that he deserves. He has learnt to ride a horse and a bike: he is a happy little boy.

I urge doctors to be open minded about medical cannabis: educate yourselves and listen to your patients. You have the power to change the lives of people who are very unwell.

HANNAH DEACON

PATIENT ADVOCATE & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MCCS



1 BECOME INFORMED

KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

Medical cannabis treatment is a legal and valid option for patients with chronic conditions.

When the Government changed the law to make medical cannabis available on prescription, they stated:

GMC Specialist Doctors must make decisions on prescribing cannabis-based products for medicinal use on a case-by-case basis, and only when the patient has an unmet special clinical need that cannot be met by licensed products. Medical cannabis is considered a treatment of last resort, so patients must be able to evidence that they have tried traditional licensed medicines first.

There are no conditions which have been deemed unsuitable for referral for medical cannabis treatment.*

"Many people will enquire about using cannabis on prescription or about over the counter CBD products."

All clinicians, especially GPs, should familiarise themselves with the basic properties of the plant so they can advise patients from a standpoint of knowledge and not ignorance – or at least know where to refer patients for such expert advice."

PROF MIKE BARNES



FROM SCEPTIC TO ADVOCATE

Initially, I was very sceptical and didn't really want to entertain the idea that my patients with heavy and yet ineffective opioid use for pain control could benefit from medically prescribed cannabis medicine. I rejected the idea that cannabis can be opioid sparing.

Meanwhile, my patients with long term conditions, those with chronic debilitating symptoms of pain and spasticity, poor sleep and often little quality of life, continued to request something to help ameliorate their symptoms.

Over the course or around four years, through listening to my patients and by monitoring developments in medical cannabis at home and abroad, I became more and more curious about this option.

Following the APPG and UK Government announcement in November 2018 in support of cannabis as a medicinal product, I jumped at the opportunity to get some formal education and gain knowledge of cannabinoid medicine and the endocannabinoid system.

I began prescribing medical cannabis in 2019. This personal experience of assessing, prescribing and seeing patients get their desired outcomes and increased quality of life, often after many years of opioid use, has transformed my view of cannabis as a medicine.

I feel that other physicians should not close their minds to this alternative product for symptom management. I consider medical cannabis treatment a harm-reduction measure from opioid use.

DR ELIE OKIRIE MSC, FEPRM, FRCP

CONSULTANT IN NEUROLOGICAL AND SPECIALIST REHABILITATION



2 BE OPEN MINDED TO ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

If a patient shares with you that they would like to access medical cannabis treatment, be open minded.

In many cases, patients will have undertaken a great deal of research into the options and may consider this the last option for a better quality of life.

If a patient talks about their experience of self-medicating medical cannabis, open the conversation and let them know they can talk to you about it.

They may want to talk about the impact on their symptoms or their concerns about buying this illegally.

Patients accessing cannabis on the black market may be at risk of arrest or be using cannabis products which are very high in THC, the compound which has a psycho mimetic effect people often associate with the feeling of getting 'high'.

Accessing medical cannabis on prescription is safer, with tightly regulated products and regular contact with health care professionals for monitoring and dosage adjustments.



AN OPEN MINDED, NON-JUDGEMENTAL APPROACH

The patients I care for are complex, have chronic pain and long-term conditions. Despite trying most conventional medications, they still have poorly controlled symptoms and often try complementary therapies, with varying success.

Medical cannabis offers them another option to try and improve their symptoms and quality of life. It is not a miracle cure, but I have seen it help many patients now, improving pain, sleep, spasticity, anxiety and reducing opioid and other medication use.

You need to be informed and keep up to date. There are some excellent teaching aids available now, and don't forget that you are at the start of something and so new research and guidelines are being updated regularly.

Consultations can be different - often patients know more about cannabis than I do - particularly from the point of view of which strain suits them, and I have been surprised how many patients have or are self-medicating, or have tried medical cannabis abroad. It is important to listen and not to judge or jump to conclusions so you can prescribe what is most likely to be effective for their symptoms.

Listening and being prepared to learn from your patient's experiences to help when making decisions is really valuable. Managing patient expectations is important - explaining that they may not notice a big difference straight away (sleep usually improves quickly), but they will need to have patience and increase their dose slowly in order to achieve the balance between symptom relief and side effects.

In my experience so far, medical cannabis is very well tolerated if prescribed in this way and has made a difference to many of my patients' symptoms and quality of life.

DR LIZ IVESON MBCHB, FRCP UK

CONSULTANT STROKE AND NEUROREHABILITATION PHYSICIAN



3 FACILITATE APPROPRIATE REFERRALS FOR TREATMENT

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS
ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

Medical cannabis is only available privately to patients in the UK at present, and clinics require a referral from a GP or specialist before they can explore treatment options.

Medical cannabis clinics in the UK are registered with the CQC with strict regulation governing their service.

Referrals should be made in the usual way, with a letter outlining why the referral is required, details of relevant functional or social circumstances, medical history and diagnoses.

A list of CQC-registered medical cannabis clinics in the UK can be found at www.ukmccs.org.



THE ROLE OF GPs

Current UK legislation permits GPs to monitor and prescribe cannabis-based medical products under a shared care arrangement with specialists.

Therefore, it is essential that all GPs are equipped with a basic understanding of the endocannabinoid system and the therapeutic potential of medical cannabis for patients who may be interested in this alternative therapy. GPs must also be familiar with the regulatory landscape within the UK and the various referral pathways that currently exist for medical cannabis treatments.

As a GP, I encounter a large number of patients who are using cannabis or over the counter CBD products for a range of medical purposes.

If we are to offer the best care to our patients, it is crucial that we are able to openly discuss cannabis use in a non-judgemental manner and continue to deepen our understanding of how cannabis and CBD products may affect the health of our patients - including understanding therapeutic effects, side effects, dosing and potential drug interactions.

Those patients who are not eligible for medical cannabis treatments on the NHS and who wish to explore medical cannabis treatment for an unmet clinical need currently have the choice of a number of private clinics or to enrol themselves within a clinical trial. Patients have the right to be involved in discussions and make informed decisions about who provides their care and treatment and it is a duty of GPs to support their patients as much as they are able to, in decisions about their care.

DR LEON BARRON

MBBS, MSC, MMUS, MRCGP, GENERAL PRACTITIONER



4 MAKE YOUR NEXT CPD ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

There is a wealth of global evidence supporting medical cannabis as a treatment option for chronic pain, neurological and psychological conditions.

For centuries, cannabis has been used for medicinal purposes. Following prohibition and law changes, its use became limited and the scope of its benefits not appreciated. Despite its long history, there is still much to be learned about the medical benefits and potential risks of this remarkable plant. With any new treatment, it is crucial that clinicians are confident about dosing, interactions with other drugs, tolerability and prescribing information – able to counter impressive claims with evidence-based knowledge.

MEDICAL CANNABIS EXPLAINED: BECOME A CONFIDENT PRESCRIBER

Become an expert in your field by accessing world class education and make sure that your patients receive only the highest quality care when it comes to their treatment plan. Gain insight into what product type may be best suited for different indications and tap into resources through the Society that will help you develop new skills.

Members of the Society can sign up via Eventbrite to take part in the next training session. Training takes place on a bi-monthly basis. Attendance is £99 for members. Not yet a member? Join today and sign up for the next training session.

BOOK



A PATIENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Medical cannabis was first mentioned to me by my doctor as he knew he had no alternative treatment plans to offer me - and simply couldn't increase my dose of fentanyl anymore. I had never even heard of medical cannabis before, but was so unwell that I would have tried anything to improve my quality of life.

He attempted to prescribe me a cannabis based medical product which was immediately denied funding by the NHS trust due to a "lack of evidence on its efficacy and a significant side effect profile". I was forced to break the law to access my medicine - a decision that has completely changed my life for the better.

Six months after I started medicating illegally, private cannabis clinics started opening and prescribing in the UK. My GP was happy to support a referral to the clinic when I explained the symptoms that were unmanaged by my current treatments and the associated debilitating side-effects.

My doctors were very supportive of my medical cannabis prescription and were relieved I was taking pharmaceutical-grade medication instead of from the black market. They described the effect the prescription had on my health as a 'transformation' and were keen to understand the medicine further, despite being initially sceptical.

When a patient is disclosing their previous illegal cannabis consumption, please be aware of how daunting this can be, and that many patients are afraid of being reported. I felt too stigmatised to open up about my illicit cannabis consumption - which was heart-breaking as it had already significantly improved my life and allowed me to stop taking fentanyl.

I hope that doctors considering medical cannabis for their patients will simply be open to the possibility of improving chronic illness patient's quality of life. Medical cannabis is not a miracle cure - and shouldn't be sold as one - but has so much potential in reducing suffering. Medical cannabis is also not a one-size-fits-all treatment, and patients may have to change products, dose or consumption method before they find their fit - so please don't give up straight away!

LUCY STAFFORD

Lucy works with PLEA, a campaigning group for better access to medical cannabis. She lives with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome.



5 JOIN THE MEDICAL CANNABIS CLINICIANS SOCIETY

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PATIENTS
ABOUT MEDICAL CANNABIS

Members of the Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society are a peer support network of prescribing doctors, providing expert mentorship, regular sector updates and reduced entry for events and training.

Speak to our committee members, some of whom are already prescribing.

Share your experience of learning and training, share evidence and research and ask for support, 24/7.

Peer support and education for physicians is paramount to being able to provide safe and effective cannabinoid medicines to our patients.

As a physician mentor to doctors new to medical cannabis, I support others. Personally, I benefited from mentors along my own prescribing journey, especially with difficult cases. We founded the UK MCCS to help bring this support to UK doctors."

DR DANI GORDON



REFLECTING ON THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

"When patients first started asking me about medical cannabis a decade ago in my practice in Canada, I was extremely sceptical.

At first, I feared this was a way to potentially get high or get legal access to a controlled substance for recreational use.

However, after much thought and research and seeing my patients successfully self-medicate with cannabis and reduce their opioid needs, I decided to educate myself and start prescribing.

Since then, thousands of patients later, I can honestly say that I have not had a single case of 'drug seeking' in the patients referred to me for medical cannabis therapy.

On the contrary, I have been able to establish a dramatic reduction in opioid and unsuitable polypharmacy and improved the quality of people's lives.

In addition, I have seen favourable side effect profiles in complex chronic symptom clusters that had failed many other medical therapies. This all started with me listening to my patients with an open mind to their experience."

DR DANI GORDON MD CCFP ABOIM ABIHM

INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE & CANNABIS MEDICINE CONSULTANT

THE MEDICAL CANNABIS CLINICIANS SOCIETY

INDEPENDENT, EXPERT SUPPORT FOR CLINICIANS

The Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society is an independent community of medical cannabis pioneers – the first prescribers of this treatment in the UK.

We believe that every patient who could benefit from medical cannabis should have access to it.

We provide the medical and scientific community interested in supporting patients with medical cannabis with high-quality training and expert support.

Membership is open to those with a professional interest in medical cannabis, including clinicians, nurses, GPs, allied health professionals (AHPs), medical students, healthcare scientists, pharmacists and those working across acute, primary and community healthcare.

As part of the UK's leading group of medical cannabis experts, members have access to information to inform treatment decisions, up-to-date product guidance and support to ensure clinicians can become as confident in prescribing medical cannabis as they are with first line treatments.

With the most respected medical cannabis clinicians in the country providing support, members are better able to help their patients.

Annual membership is £90 for consultants, GPs and others and £45 for nurses and AHPs. Membership is free for medical students and we welcome international members.

Join online at www.ukmccs.org.

OUR WORK IS MADE POSSIBLE BY UNRESTRICTED EDUCATIONAL GRANT FUNDING FROM SUPPORTERS.

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