

Colorado medical students defend physicians' right to recommend marijuana

Students cite lack of data and training, hesitate to prescribe it themselves

In the first study of its kind, University of Colorado School of Medicine students expressed support for the legal use of marijuana, including for physical and mental health reasons. They also believe more research is needed to ascertain what risk could be involved in using the drug. These were some of the findings of a study led by Michael Chan, a recent graduate of the CU Anschutz Medical Campus.

Colorado students viewed the legalization of marijuana favorably, medicinal or otherwise, and generally felt that the medical use of marijuana is acceptable in the treatment of conditions approved by the Colorado Medical Marijuana Registry. Nearly half (49 percent) felt that it had significant physical health benefits and 37 percent believed it had mental health benefits. This contrasts with other studies, which found that most Colorado family physicians would only recommend marijuana for patients who suffer from pain or cancer and that only 27 percent of physicians thought it had significant physical health benefits.

The study¹, "Colorado Medical Students' Attitudes and Beliefs about Marijuana," was published today in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*² by Springer. It investigated the attitudes of medical students in Colorado, a state that has long been at the forefront of marijuana legal reforms³.

"Despite strong support for marijuana legal reform, students expressed hesitancy to recommend it themselves, suggesting that medical students may not believe that there is enough data to safely recommend its use to patients and/or may not feel sufficiently trained to prescribe it," said Chan, now a resident at the University of Texas Health Science Center.

These reforms have seen the decriminalization of marijuana on many fronts in recent years. In Colorado, it is legal for adults to use it for medicinal and recreational purposes.

Previous studies have shown that opinions vary among physicians about the value of prescribing marijuana. To add further insights into the matter, Chan's team set out to find out what medical students at the CU School of Medicine at the Anschutz Medical Campus thought about the drug's use. In all, 236 of the 624 students contacted by e-mail completed the survey.

Students who grew up in Colorado were more in favor of medical marijuana than those who did not grow up there. This was also true for the 127 students who reported having used marijuana before. This finding is in line with previous studies showing that people with histories of substance use, including marijuana, believe the risk of adverse effects is relatively low.

The students were nearly unanimous (97 percent) in calling for further research into the medical usefulness of marijuana. Most expressed concern about possible physical (68 percent) and mental (77 percent) consequences, while 88 percent thought it could be addictive.

Chan and co-author Dan Matlock are now working to study how students are being educated about medical marijuana and its potential for health or harm.

“Clearly, medical students have a need for excellent education on marijuana,” said Matlock, MD, MPH, and associate professor of geriatrics at the CU School of Medicine. “There’s a lot we don’t know and, medically, there is so little data.”

References:

1. Chan, M.H. *et al.* (2016). Colorado Medical Students’ Attitudes and Beliefs about Marijuana, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. DOI 10.1007/s11606-016-3957-y
2. The *Journal of General Internal Medicine* is the official journal of the Society of General Internal Medicine.
3. Although legal under state law, marijuana is still a schedule 1 substance that is illegal under federal law.

The full-text article is available to journalists on request.

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<http://www.springer.com/journal/11606>

Journal of General Internal Medicine

Editor-in-Chief: Asch, S.; Bates, C.; Jackson, J.

ISSN: 0884-8734 (print version)

ISSN: 1525-1497 (electronic version)

Journal no. 11606