Editorial

Ethical Dilemmas Revolving Around the use of Medical Cannabis for Multiple Sclerosis in Pakistan

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Conflict of Interest: None.

SUMMARY

This editorial explores the complex landscape surrounding the use of medical cannabis for treating Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in Pakistan, a country with a significant prevalence of the condition but facing numerous challenges in cannabis utilization. Despite cannabis' historical therapeutic applications and emerging global recognition for its medical benefits, Pakistan's strict anti-cannabis laws, influenced by cultural and religious beliefs, significantly hinder its adoption. The editorial highlights the need for educational and regulatory frameworks to improve awareness and control the medical cannabis market, suggesting that such measures could enhance treatment options for MS patients and generate tax revenue, while addressing concerns about addiction and illegal trade.

Keywords: Cannabis Legalization, Medical Marijuana, Multiple Sclerosis, Socioeconomic Impact

Cannabis, a plant with a rich history of medicinal use dating back thousands of years, has seen a resurgence in interest for its therapeutic potential, particularly in the management of pain, gout, and rheumatism. Despite its classification in 1970 as a substance lacking medical significance—a decision that significantly halted medical research—recent advancements have illuminated the plant's diverse applications and relatively minimal side effects. This shift in perception has led to the legalization of medical cannabis in over 25 states in the USA since April 2015. Meanwhile, Pakistan, despite being among the largest producers of cannabis, has faced stringent restrictions on its use for industrial and medical purposes, largely influenced by the global war on terror and the country's adherence to anti-cannabis stances based on political and religious grounds (1). However, recent developments have seen the issuance of licenses by both federal and provincial governments, allowing for its possession without legal repercussions (2).

The American Academy of Neurology (AAN) has classified oral cannabis extract as Level A effective for managing symptoms of spasticity and pain in multiple sclerosis (MS) (3). Similarly, European guidelines on palliative care for MS advocate for the use of cannabis extract in addressing pain, fatigue, and urinary symptoms associated with severe cases of the disease (4). Numerous studies evaluating the efficacy of cannabinoids in treating MS-related symptoms such as pain, spasticity, and bladder issues have generally found synthetic cannabinoids to have a favorable impact, despite the small sample sizes and varied outcome measures of these studies (5).

In Pakistan, where MS is becoming a leading cause of pain and disability, the effective use of cannabis according to these guidelines faces several obstacles. The nation's socio-economic landscape, characterized by a predominance of the lower socio-economic class, poses significant challenges in raising awareness about the medicinal benefits of cannabis. A study conducted in a densely populated province revealed that this demographic perceives cannabis as highly addictive compared to its actual addiction rate of 9%, which is significantly lower than that of hard drugs like heroin, cocaine, and alcohol. Misunderstandings rooted in cultural and religious norms further obstruct the medicinal application of cannabis. Nevertheless, the upper class appears more receptive to the global trend of cannabis legalization, likely due to better access to education and resources, highlighting the importance of comprehensive educational efforts across all socio-economic strata to enhance understanding of cannabis's medicinal value. Such initiatives could not only expand treatment options but also boost government revenues through taxation.

The introduction of medical cannabis in Pakistan, a country grappling with the high prevalence of MS and the scarcity of affordable treatment options, could offer substantial benefits. However, the path towards its judicious use and broader acceptance is fraught

with challenges. Establishing medical marijuana regulatory structures for the implementation and enforcement of legal marijuana laws is critical. Strict regulation of marijuana production is essential to control the market, maximize tax benefits, and mitigate the risk of black market expansion, which could undermine legal sales due to price differentials.

Moreover, long-term research is necessary to accurately assess the benefits and potential harms associated with cannabis use. This research should aim to provide a solid evidence base to support policy decisions and healthcare practices, ultimately facilitating the responsible integration of cannabis into medical treatment regimens.

As discussions on medical cannabis evolve, it is crucial to approach the topic with an open, informed perspective. By addressing the socio-economic and cultural barriers to cannabis use, and by implementing robust regulatory and research frameworks, Pakistan can harness the therapeutic potential of cannabis for the benefit of its citizens, particularly those suffering from debilitating conditions like MS. The journey towards the acceptance and integration of medical cannabis into mainstream healthcare is complex and requires concerted efforts from all sectors of society (6). However, the potential rewards—improved patient outcomes, economic growth, and the alleviation of the burden on healthcare systems—make it a path worth pursuing.

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