



January 23, 2015

Our office has had a complaint that you are denying your patients pain medication if they are using medical marijuana.

**There is no law requiring pain clinics or doctors to screen out marijuana users, according to legal experts.** Medical marijuana patients are being caught up in a push to drug test in order to ensure compliance with prescription opiates. Many practitioners wrongly assume that they are obliged to screen out marijuana users as well.

**Many studies have found cannabis and cannabinoids are useful for pain patients, with few side effects.** The California Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research, established by the state legislature at University of California in 2000 to conduct controlled scientific studies of medical marijuana, reported positive results in six different human clinical trials regarding chronic pain, spasticity and vaporization. CMCR director Prof. Igor Grant concluded in the report to the legislature, "There is good evidence now that cannabinoids may be a good adjunct or even first line treatment" for neuralgia. See: <http://www.canorml.org/news/CMCReport.html>

Not only that, but recent studies have shown that marijuana is a useful adjunct to opiates, working along parallel paths to enhance pain relief while actually lowering the required dosage of opiates. **Knowledgeable specialists therefore regard medical marijuana as an exit, rather than a gateway, to narcotic abuse.**

As far back as 1997, Dr. Sandra Welch from the University of Virginia was studying the interaction of opioids and cannabinoids, with promising results in animal studies showing that the two have a synergistic effect, see: [http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record\\_id=6376&page=233](http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=6376&page=233)[http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record\\_id=6376&page=233](http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=6376&page=233)

These findings were confirmed in a recent of 21 individuals with chronic pain, which concluded that "vaporized cannabis augments the analgesic effects of opioids without significantly altering plasma opioid levels. The combination may allow for opioid treatment at lower doses with fewer side effects." See: [Cannabinoid–Opioid Interaction in](#)

Chronic Pain D I Abrams, P Couey, S B Shade, M E Kelly and N L Benowitz *Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics* 90, 844-851 (December 2011)  
<http://www.nature.com/clpt/journal/v90/n6/full/clpt2011188a.html>

**The US Veterans Administration announced in 2010 it would allow medical marijuana use by patients on opioid therapy.** I have recently confirmed that this remains their policy. See: <http://www.canorml.org/news/VA.html>

A recent study shows that the number of opiate overdoses is down by 25% in states with medical marijuana programs (<http://blog.norml.org/2014/08/25/jama-medical-cannabis-states-possess-lower-rates-of-opiate-induced-fatalities/>) and suicides in those states are also down. (<http://blog.norml.org/2012/02/21/study-passage-of-medical-marijuana-laws-correlated-with-fewer-suicides>).

A survey conducted by scientists of the Australian National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and other institutions found that pain patients who receive opioids experience better pain relief if they also take cannabis. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25533893>

Cannabis has also been found helpful in treating intractable pain (see: [http://www.canorml.org/medical\\_marijuana/RussoPain.pdf](http://www.canorml.org/medical_marijuana/RussoPain.pdf)) and a 2012 study from Vancouver found that increased access to medical marijuana reduced patients' use of opiates and other addictive drugs (see <http://norml.org/news/2012/08/02/increased-access-to-therapeutic-cannabis-likely-to-reduce-patients-use-of-opiates-other-addictive-drugs>).

We recommend that medical marijuana patients whose doctors refuse them their prescription pain medications file a complaint with the California Medical Board.

Please feel free to contact our office if you would like to discuss this matter.

Sincerely,

Ellen Komp  
Deputy Director  
California NORML