Medical Marijuana

Background:
Over the past 20 years, nearly half of the United States have developed and implemented policies that sanction medical marijuana use for qualified patients. Since then, researchers have been actively analyzing and drawing conclusions about the policy’s public health ramifications. While medical marijuana programs may vary from state to state, they most commonly allow medical marijuana for the treatment of severe, intractable pain.

There is no denying the chronic pain and prescription drug problem in our country. As the number of prescriptions for chronic pain has doubled over the past decade, the number of opioid use disorders and overdose deaths has also risen dramatically. Approximately 60% of all opioid analgesic overdoses occur among patients who have legitimate prescriptions from a single provider.

Policies such as prescription drug monitoring programs, increased security of patients and providers, and enhanced access to substance abuse treatment are advocated to reduce the risk of opioid and prescription drug related deaths. However, little attention has been focused on how availability of alternative non-opioid treatments may affect these overdose rates.

A 2014 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, explored the relationship between state medical marijuana laws and opioid overdose mortality and has yielded powerful results. States with medical marijuana laws have had a nearly 25% lower mean annual opioid overdose mortality rate compared with states without medical marijuana laws. Researchers then examined the association between medical marijuana laws and opioid overdose mortality in each year after implementation of the law. They found that such laws were associated with a lower rate of overdose mortality that generally strengthened over time.

Authors of this research stated that the study provides evidence of the emerging public health benefits of medical marijuana laws and policies that will hopefully lead to further assessment of the role of marijuana in chronic pain and opioid addiction.

Additional research has been published that shows states with legalized medical marijuana saw declines in the number of Medicare prescriptions for drugs used to treat conditions related to chronic pain, anxiety, and depression. So far, medical marijuana saved Medicare approximately

$165 million in 2013. It is also estimated that if medical marijuana were available nationwide, Medicare Part D spending would have declined in the same year by approximately $470 million⁶.

**Issue:**

Overdoses involving opioids in the United States have reached epidemic proportions, and despite their addictive and harmful side effects, they remain the most frequently prescribed medicine to treat chronic pain.

The HOPE Agenda (Heroin, Opioid Prevention Education), started by Representative Nygren in 2013, has presented compelling statistics about the growing drug problem in Wisconsin. The number of citizens who die as a result of drug overdose now exceeds the number of those who die from motor vehicle crashes, suicide, breast cancer, colon cancer, firearms, influenza, and HIV. Opioid related overdose deaths more than tripled in Wisconsin from 194 deaths in 2003 to 622 deaths in 2014. Prescription opioid pain relievers such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, and methadone contributed to about one-half of the total drug overdose deaths, and heroin contributes to about one-third. Although heroin abuse has increased heavily over the past years, the number of overdose deaths from prescription pain medication is larger than those of heroin and cocaine combined⁷.

**Solution:**

Research done in states with medical marijuana laws are already showing signs of the positive impact this treatment has had on individuals experiencing chronic pain, as well as those already dependent on pain medication, who are looking for a safer alternative to opioids. These studies provide insight to the value of medical marijuana as an effective pain medication and as an effective agent against opioid abuse and overdose ⁸.

In addition to the HOPE Agenda, introducing medical marijuana policies as a part of a comprehensive program to combat prescription drug abuse and addiction could significantly reduce the rate of opioid related deaths that are running rampant among the citizens of our state.

**Position:**

NASW-WI supports bills AB75/SB38 to legalize and regulate the use of marijuana for medical purposes.

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⁸ Harm Reduction Journal, “Cannabis as a substitute for other drugs”. Available at: https://harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1477-7517-6-35