Medical Cannabis: An Oxymoron?

Discourse Analysis of Qualitative Interviews with Israeli Physicians

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MATERIA MEDICA.

ERIGERON HETEROPHYLLUM. Various-leaved Fleabane.

The herb of Erigeron heterophyllum.

ERIGERON PHILADELPHICUM. Philadelphia Fleabane.

The herb of Erigeron Philadelphicum.

ERYNGIUM. Button Snakeroot.

The root of Eryngium aquaticum.

ERYTHRIONIUM. Erythronium.

The root and herb of Erythronium Americanum (Bigelow, Amer. Med. Botany).

EUPHORBIA COROLLATA. Large-flowering Spurge.

The root of Euphorbia corollata.

EUPHORBIA IPECACUANHA. Ipecacuanha Spurge.

The root of Euphorbia Ipecacuanha.

EXTRACTUM CANNABIS. Extract of Hemp.

An alcoholic extract of the dried tops of Cannabis sativa—variety Indica.
Background

During the 20th century

• Outlawed throughout the world
• UN conventions of 1961, 1972
• Schedule I drug
Background

Scientific findings on cannabis
• Isolation of active compounds (cannabinoids)
• Cannabinoid receptors
• The endo-cannabinoid system

Δ-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)
Mechoulam and Ga’oni, 1964
Background

- Changing policies

U.S. (25 states & DC), Canada, The Netherlands, Israel, Czech Republic, Germany...
Background

Physicians’ dominant role

• Direct authorization
• Medical recommendation

• Controversial and negative views towards medical cannabis (Charuvastra et al., 2005; Kondrad and Reid, 2013; Michalec et al., 2015; Carlini et al., 2015; Uritsky et al., 2011)
Objective

To understand the views and experiences of Israeli physicians with the recent introduction of medical cannabis into their professional domain.
Methods

• Sample – 24 Israeli physicians of 3 specialties: Oncology (n=9) Pain medicine (n=6) Family medicine (n=9)

• Interviews – semi-constructed, open-ended questions
  What advantages/disadvantages do you see in recommending medical cannabis to your patients?

• Data Analysis – free coding, iterative process of merging, defining and re-defining content areas. Interaction between text and context.
Results

Cannabis as a non-medicine

Cannabis as a medicine
Results – Cannabis as a non-medicine

Clashes with the biomedical model

• Lack of standardization
• Lack of scientific evidence (randomized control trials)

• Smoking

“There are different varieties, and we don’t know which is better for what. We don’t know what is the ideal amount of THC and CBD for various conditions, so there’s not enough research, not enough good strong, hard evidence, which is what doctors need. We need strong evidence. We need to know that when we are giving a certain drug, we are going to give it in a certain concentration because we want to receive a certain effect, with expected side effects and so on.”

Physician no.3, pain physician
Results – Cannabis as a non-medicine

• Medical education

"In our medical education they taught us not to give something which did not have quality control performed on it, with the necessary double-blind research, with results which are either statistically significant or not. This is how we learned that medicines are approved... This is what we were taught, and we also have our prejudices. This is what we've learned, cannabis is poisonous and addictive, and it's hard, hard to get it out of ... I prescribe [other medications] more freely than I would have prescribed cannabis. That's it. A fact. And I am willing to be persuaded that it's not true. Especially after I heard Mechoulam, Professor Raphi Mechoulam, Professor Mechoulam, Professor, Raphi Mechoulam, I heard him several times, two or three times. I was very impressed."

Physician 19, family physician
Physician 19, family physician

• Ambivalence

• Institutional point of view
Results – *Cannabis as a non-medicine*

**Moralizing discourse**

- Recreational addictive drug
- Moral gatekeeping
- Legalization and diversion

“I see my patients – once they started to use cannabis they would never stop. Why should they? They feel good, they smoke, *they're high*. They haven’t solved anything... I think this is wrong medically. It’s the easiest way. So we can also inject a bit of *heroin*, or give them *cocaine* or *ecstasy*. Why not *ecstasy*? It gets you *high*”

*Physician no.11, family physician*

“We know that *they sell it.*”

*Physician no.11, family physician*

“There is a social wave of people that bought cannabis all the time, and now it is a festive opportunity for them to *legalize it*. “

*Physician no. 25, family physician*
Results – Cannabis as a non-medicine

Moralizing discourse

• Patients – fake, criminals
• Drug addicts, pot-heads
• Demanding patients
• Hard interactions

"A drug addict, who had cancer very long time ago came to our pain clinic on this "ticket" of oncology patient, and asked to receive cannabis. His treatments were long since ended, he doesn’t suffer from pain, and when I told him that he is not eligible, he started to scream and to go wild and to threaten. And this is one of the cases which ended with the police."

Physician no.6, pain physician
Results – Cannabis as a medicine

Clinical experience

• “Real-life evidence”

• Trusting patients’ reports

"As time goes by, when I see a patient who used it, and nothing bad happened and it helped him, so I will use it with other patients more freely... I can still give it more easily when I see for myself, and as I acquire my experience... if it helped this one, so it might also help the other one. This is my own evidence".

Physician no.9, family physician
Results – Cannabis as a medicine

Limitations of the biomedical model

• Critical views on EBM
• Comparison to conventional medications

"With medical cannabis there's also the chance to decrease the amount of other medications that a patient receives, some of them that have more side effects so this is, this would be an indirect advantage of using cannabis – to decrease use of other medications with their side effects“

Physician no.3, pain physician

"We are dealing with these question regarding a lot of medications. To what extent is there a connection between the surrounding in which that research was done and the treatment surrounding where I am working now? So in this sense there is evidence [on medical cannabis]. For sure reasonable that is to say."

Physician no.5, family physician
Results – Cannabis as a medicine

Compassion and palliative care

"Since I'm in oncology I became much easier on the trigger with palliative medications. Not only with cannabis but also with opioids. When you understand how much those patients suffer, then many of the concerns about side-effects, like addiction, are not so relevant. I don't care. If a patient with metastatic cancer gets addicted, I don't care. If it helps him, so even if he would have these side-effects, I am not very concerned".

Physician no.12, oncologist
Discussion

• Dual perception of cannabis

Biomedical discourse

• Jurisdictional justifications (Gieryn, 1983)
• Reinforcing professional authority (Goldenberg, 2006; Rodwin, 2001)
• Similarity to CAM in Israel (Mizrachi et al. 2005; Shuval et al. 2002)
Discussion

• Moralizing discourse

• Stigmatization of patients (Lucas 2009; Pedersen and Sandberg, 2013; Bottoroff et al. 2013; Satterlund et al. 2015)

• Evidence might not enough
Discussion

• Educational needs

• Future policy developments
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Anesthesia Department
Pain Relief Unit

Dear patients:
Cannabis-FREE clinic

Emek Medical Center (Afula)
Sample

• Physicians who have gone public with positive views on medical cannabis
• Colleagues of the collaborator physician
• Head of departments/units
• “others”

• Snowball sampling
Strengths and Limitations

• Primary data on the barriers of the integration

• Israeli sample only