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Cannabis based products for medicinal use

We need to strengthen the evidence base and improve access for patients

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Draft recommendations by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) did not recommend prescription of unlicensed cannabis based products to patients on the NHS.1 The potential benefits for people with chronic pain were considered too small relative to costs, and the quality of evidence was rated too low to recommend use in children with severe treatment resistant epilepsy.1 At present, the only way to get cannabis products for medicinal use in the UK is through prescriptions issued by private clinics2 (which are prohibitively expensive) or the illicit market (which carries risk of prosecution as well as unknown product content, quality, and safety). Given the forceful demands for access to these products from patients and their carers,3 stronger evidence is urgently needed so that these products can be made available in situations where they are known to be effective and safe.

Cannabis based medicines vary in their content of Δ⁹-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), which have contrasting mechanisms of action, efficacy, and safety.4 Some cannabis based medicines include both THC and CBD, which can interact with each other.5 Although evidence from randomised controlled trials is stronger for certain formulations (such as CBD for severe treatment resistant epilepsy), patients have expressed a preference for treatments such as THC combined with CBD.3 Gathering evidence for such treatments is a priority and can be done by using alternative trial designs and patient registries.
Alternative trial designs

To compare varied cannabis based products efficiently, randomised controlled trials can follow adaptive designs. For example, patients can be initially randomised to one of several treatment arms such as THC, CBD, or THC combined with CBD. Interim analysis can eliminate treatment arms with poor efficacy or safety at an early stage, while randomisation continues to trial arms testing potentially effective doses.

Cannabis based products have been investigated for a wide range of medical indications, some of which may share aetiologies related to the endocannabinoid system. When multiple disorders are characterised by the same underlying mechanism, basket trials can investigate a single targeted intervention across multiple diagnostic categories. Alternatively, when different mechanisms are known to give rise to a common medical diagnosis, umbrella trials can stratify patients into different treatment arms based on the underlying disease mechanism, allocating targeted interventions to each group.

Stratification can also occur at the level of the individual patient. N-of-1 trials allow randomised, double blind comparisons of active and control treatments in a cyclical manner sequentially in the same patient. These trials can establish efficacy and safety within an individual, and the results from multiple patients can be combined with meta-analysis.

Such trials have been used to evaluate cannabis based products in people with chronic pain and could be used for other indications such as severe treatment resistant epilepsy. They are ideally suited to situations such as treatment for compassionate reasons, unlicensed use, and for patients who fail to respond to conventional treatments, as is often the case for cannabis based medicines. Establishing individual patients as “responders” by using n-of-1 trials could provide evidence strong enough to justify continued prescription.

Randomised controlled trials are not the only source of evidence. The European Medicines Agency and the US Food and Drug Administration have approved many drugs without randomised trials. Other sources of evidence used to support drug approvals include randomised trials without a control group (for example, different doses of active drug with no placebo), historical control studies, and observational studies. Where cannabis based medicines are
provided on private prescription,\textsuperscript{2} patient registries should be set up to generate observational
data on real-world clinical practice and outcomes. Such data can be rapidly obtained at minimal
cost and may be combined with registries outside the UK—in countries such as Canada and
Israel.

**Need for industry cooperation**

Initial public funding to support research into cannabis based products has been offered
through dedicated calls from the National Institute of Health Research. However, the UK’s
parliamentary Health and Social Care Committee has raised concerns about the unwillingness of
industry to provide cannabis based products for research\textsuperscript{13} or to support or conduct clinical trials
on their products. Greater support from industry could increase access to cannabis based
products in a research context and help patients avoid the excessive costs of private
prescriptions.\textsuperscript{2} Providing access to cannabis based products in trials with informed consent can
offer participants balanced information on the possible benefits and risks, which are uncertain
based on the evidence at present.

The current limited evidence for cannabis based products alongside clear patient demand
requires new solutions. Further trials are urgently needed, and designs such as n-of-1 trials can
provide rapid evidence to inform treatment and optimise clinical outcomes for individual
patients.\textsuperscript{3} Like all research methods, randomised trials have their limitations, such as poor
generalisability. Data should also be sought from alternative methods, such as observational
research using data from patient registries, which can be triangulated with other findings to
develop a robust evidence base.\textsuperscript{14}

Competing interests: We have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and
declare TPF is funded by a senior academic fellowship from the Society for the Study of
Addiction (SSA). CH is supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)
University College London Hospitals Biomedical Research Centre. The views expressed here are
those of the authors, and do not reflect those of the University of Bath, the University of Exeter,
UCL, the SSA, or the NIHR.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

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