

Legalisation of marijuana in South Africa

Over the past five years, there appears to have been an increasing number of campaigns for the legalisation and decriminalisation of marijuana around the world, particularly in America and South Africa. During this period in particular the campaign has gathered momentum, but has had contrasting outcomes in both countries. The campaign has also been controversial and has often led to heated debates between the two opposing sides.¹ The South African authorities have, over many years, consistently opposed any legalisation or decriminalisation of marijuana, even though there has been growing global support for the legalisation and decriminalisation of certain drugs (i.e. those that are perceived as “less harmful” illicit drugs, such as marijuana) while still enforcing the prohibition on the “hard” drugs such as heroin, cocaine, tic and nyaope.² Some people have a negative attitude towards marijuana worldwide as a result of a deliberate portrayal of the plant as being totally bad. Ayanigbara emphasises that this negative attitude is due to misinformation.³ Van Niekerk⁴ indicates that marijuana is much less harmful than the two legalised drugs, alcohol and tobacco, and has potential medicinal benefits. In a qualitative study conducted in 2010, participants who were mental healthcare users indicated that marijuana is a contributory factor to their mental illness. Participants also indicated that marijuana leads to social, legal, educational and occupational problems.⁵ From the above discussion, it is clear that there are still a lot of debates around marijuana. As a result, I suggest more research on marijuana before it can be legalised in South Africa. Such research should follow different approaches such as qualitative, quantitative, systematic review or mixed methods research. The South African government should fund institutions of higher learning and research in order for them to conduct more research on this topic. Research results should be used either to legalise or not legalise marijuana in South Africa.

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Response from the editor

Thank you for your letter regarding the legal status of marijuana in South Africa and, as you indicated, heated debates on opposite sides of the legalisation debate. We have consulted with experts who are researching the medicinal use of marijuana. The conclusions of a review by Lutge, Gray & Siegfried¹ (2013) indicate that whether there is sufficient evidence to justify wide-ranging revisiting of medicines regulatory practice remains unclear. The authors highlight that the use of cannabis (marijuana), its active ingredient or synthetic forms such as dronabinol, has been advocated in patients with HIV/AIDS, in order to improve appetite, promote weight gain and lift mood. Dronabinol has been registered for the treatment of AIDS-associated anorexia in some countries. However, the evidence for positive effects in patients with HIV/AIDS is limited, and some of that which exists may be subject to the effects of bias. Those studies that have been performed have included small numbers of participants and have focused on short-term effects. Longer-term data, and data showing a benefit in terms of survival, are lacking.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) is currently involved in a strong research programme on substance abuse (<http://www.mrc.ac.za/adarg/adarg.htm>) and has been involved in summarising the data on medicinal use as well (<http://www.mrc.ac.za/policybriefs/Cannabinoids.pdf>). At the MCC, there is a Cannabis Working Group looking at policy issues, chaired by Prof Shabir Banoo.

Reference

1. Lutge EE, Gray A, Siegfried N. 2013. The medicinal use of cannabis for reducing morbidity and mortality in patients with HIV/AIDS (Review). *The Cochrane Library* 2013, Issue 4. (<http://www.thecochranelibrary.com>)