

# A Survey of U.S. Hospice Professionals Regarding Medical Cannabis Practices

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** With medical cannabis remaining illegal at the federal level, hospice programs are unsure how to handle requests for medical cannabis, particularly since hospice is largely funded with federal dollars. The purpose of this survey was to determine respondents' comfort level with medical cannabis use in hospice, what processes and logistics hospice programs are employing when dealing with medical cannabis, and to determine what, if any, education hospice programs are providing to their staff. **Methods:** An anonymous online survey assessed a variety of factors surrounding hospice staff practice, experience, and opinions regarding medical cannabis. The survey was disseminated to employees of clients of a large hospice benefit manager as well as through a national hospice and palliative medicine professional organization. **Results:** Three hundred and ten hospice professionals responded to the survey. More than half of the respondents were nurses followed by administrators and physicians. Regardless of legal status, hospice staff members were overwhelmingly in agreement that medical cannabis is appropriate for hospice patients to have access to and use medical cannabis. Several barriers to use were identified including discordant legal status between state and federal governments, concerns about clinical efficacy and safety, and myriad other societal factors. Wide variations in medical cannabis documentation, and education practices between hospices were noted. **Discussion:** The data suggest overwhelming support in legalizing cannabis on a federal level for medical use. Our findings highlight important opportunities to support hospice providers and their patients through education and the development of policies around medical cannabis.

## BACKGROUND

- Evidence on the effectiveness of medical cannabis dates back thousands of years, providing relief from pain, muscle spasms, anorexia, nausea, vomiting, and cachexia.<sup>1,2</sup>
- While there are several FDA-approved pharmaceutical cannabinoid products on the market, plant-based cannabis is now legal for medical use in 30 of 50 U.S. states and DC.<sup>3</sup>
- Hospice care providers, patients, and caregivers are calling for the use of plant-based cannabis to relieve pain and other symptoms.<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- Hospice programs are unsure how to handle requests for medical cannabis, particularly since it is illegal at the federal level and hospice is largely funded with federal dollars.

## OBJECTIVES

### Purpose

- Determine respondents' comfort level with the use of medical cannabis in hospice
- Understand existing processes and logistics in hospice for dealing with medical cannabis
- Determine what education hospice programs are providing to their staff

## METHODS

- Anonymous survey
- Approved by University of Maryland School of Pharmacy Institutional Review Board
- Study duration: 18 days
  - Survey period: August 29, 2018 – September 15, 2018
- Study Population:
  - Enclara Pharmacia, a national full-service PBM and mail order supplier of medications and clinical services for the hospice industry sent an email invitation to participate in the survey to over 500 hospice clients.
  - A link to the survey was also included in two National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) NewsBriefs newsletters and posted in the "Research Opportunities" section on NHPCO.org.

Baseline Characteristics	Value
Characteristic, (n=310), n (%)	
Hospice Role	
Physician	36 (11.6%)
Pharmacist	7 (2.2%)
Nurse (RN, LPN)	181 (58.3%)
Advanced Practice Nurse	11 (3.5%)
Social Worker	7 (2.2%)
Aide	4 (1.2%)
Administrator	44 (14.1%)
Other	20 (6.4%)
Average daily census where you practice	
0-50 patients	99 (31.9%)
51-200 patients	138 (44.5%)
201-500 patients	35 (11.3%)
>500 patients	38 (12.3%)
Hospice profit status	
Not for profit	212 (68.3%)
For profit	95 (30.6%)
Government	3 (0.9%)
Geographic setting of hospice?	
Primarily urban	18 (5.8%)
Primarily rural	74 (23.8%)
Primarily suburban	36 (11.6%)
Mixed urban, rural, suburban	182 (58.7%)
Is cannabis (marijuana) legal in your state?	
Legal for medical use	149 (48.0%)
Legal for recreational use	0 (0.0%)
Legal for both medical and recreational use	44 (14.1%)
Not legal, but decriminalized	6 (1.9%)
Not legal	96 (30.9%)
Not Sure	15 (4.8%)

## RESULTS

### Respondent characteristics

- 310 U.S. hospice professionals across 40 states, primarily nurses.
- Sixty-two percent of respondents reported being from states where medical cannabis was legal either for medical or recreational use.
- Thirty-three percent were from states where it was not legal and a small number of respondents reported being unsure of the legal status in their state.

## RESULTS

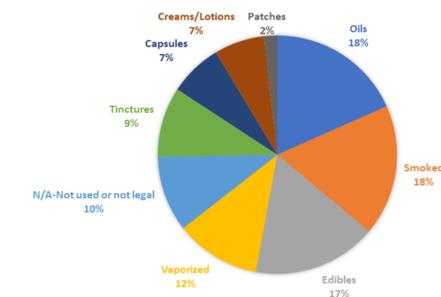
### Practice, experience, and opinions

- A majority of respondents agreed (91.2%) that medical cannabis is appropriate for hospice patients.
- A majority of respondents (82%) reported that their physicians do not recommend or certify patients for medical cannabis.
- While most clinicians are not fearful of having patients use medical cannabis, their opinions regarding how others feel (patients, family members, coworkers) are mixed.

### Processes, education, and access to care

- Documentation practices vary widely with most respondents documenting medical cannabis use within the medication profile or progress note.
- Almost one-quarter (24.5%) do not alert the pharmacist/medication reviewer when a patient is using medical cannabis.
- Only 19% of respondents stated that their hospice has a medical cannabis policy.

Figure 1. What forms of cannabis are your patients using? (Select all that apply) (Responses=894 responses, n=310)



## CONCLUSIONS

- The data suggest overwhelming support in legalizing cannabis on a federal level for medical use.
- There are still a variety of barriers/concerns with use
  - Discordant legal status between state and federal governments
  - Concerns about clinical efficacy and safety
  - Societal factors.
- Opportunities to support hospice providers
  - Education
  - Development of policies around medical cannabis.

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