

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Is marijuana better than narcotics?



**HEATHER
AULD**

obstetrician/
gynecologist
Physicians' Primary
Care of Southwest
Florida

This is a tricky question. Marijuana has been used as medicine for more than 3,000 years and only in recent decades has it been removed from our pharmacies. It has been widely used for pain, sedation, seizures and inflammation, and cramps. The American Medical Association supported the use of marijuana and its use in research but was voted down in 1942 by Congress, which favored the use of opioids and barbiturates instead.

Marijuana or cannabis contains more than 400 chemical compounds. The "high" is only from one component, THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol). The other components decrease anxiety, boost the immune system, kill respiratory pathogens and increase cerebral blood flow. Our body actually contains an endogenous cannabinoid system, which decreases inflammation, increases immunity, decreases pain, and increases appetite.

Smoking marijuana causes it to be rapidly absorbed, but it is also rapidly metabolized within 30 minutes. Orally administered THC lasts about 20-30 hours. However, smoked or vaporized marijuana is superior for pain relief.

Opioids and narcotics seem to be inferior to marijuana for neuropathy or nerve pain. In studies marijuana was as effective as gabapentin for nerve pain. Also, whereas narcotics increase nausea and vomiting, marijuana relieves those symptoms. When used with morphine, THC de-

See QUESTION » D6

Question

Continued from D1

creased the amount of narcotics needed for pain relief and thereby decreased the side effects of narcotics by decreasing the highly addictive potential of pain killers. In a survey of 1,000 oncologists, 44 percent recommended the use of marijuana to reduce the pain and side effects of cancer and its treatment.

Smoked cannabis is effective for peripheral neuropathy and decreases the sensitization of pain in the central nervous system. The main side effect to smoked marijuana seems to be euphoria or extreme feelings of well-being.

Exciting scientific studies are under way that implicate anti-tumor effects of marijuana in animal models, particularly in brain and skin tumors, but also in lung

cancer, lymphoma and colon cancer.

Many patients who suffer may benefit from the use of marijuana. Unlike the highly addictive narcotics and opioids, marijuana has the same addictive potential as caffeine. The time has come for marijuana to be placed back into the U.S. pharmacopeia.

— Heather Auld, M.D., and Fellow at the University of Arizona Department of Integrative Medicine is an obstetrician/gynecologist with Physicians' Primary Care of Southwest Florida in the Park Royal office, 9021 Park Royal Drive, Fort Myers. Call 432-5858.

