Are cannabinoids an effective and safe treatment option in the management of pain? A qualitative systematic review

Fiona A Campbell, Martin R Tramèr, Dawn Carroll, D John M Reynolds, R Andrew Moore, Henry J McQuay

Abstract

Objective To establish whether cannabis is an effective and safe treatment option in the management of pain.

Design Systematic review of randomised controlled trials.

Data sources Electronic databases Medline, Embase, Oxford Pain Database, and Cochrane Library; references from identified papers; hand searches.

Study selection Trials of cannabis given by any route of administration (experimental intervention) with any analgesic or placebo (control intervention) in patients with acute, chronic non-malignant, or cancer pain. Outcomes examined were pain intensity scores, pain relief scores, and adverse effects. Validity of trials was assessed independently with the Oxford score.

Data extraction Independent data extraction; discrepancies resolved by consensus.

Data synthesis 20 randomised controlled trials were identified, 11 of which were excluded. Of the 9 included trials (222 patients), 5 trials related to cancer pain, 2 to chronic non-malignant pain, and 2 to acute postoperative pain. No randomised controlled trials evaluated cannabis; all tested active substances were cannabinoids. Oral delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) 5-20 mg, an oral synthetic nitrogen analogue of THC 1 mg, and intramuscular levonantradol 1.5-3 mg were about as effective as codeine 50-120 mg, and oral benzopyranoperidine 2-4 mg was less effective than codeine 60-120 mg and no better than placebo. Adverse effects, most often psychotropic, were common.

Conclusion Cannabinoids are no more effective than codeine in controlling pain and have depressant effects on the central nervous system that limit their use. Their widespread introduction into clinical practice for pain management is therefore undesirable. In acute postoperative pain they should not be used. Before cannabinoids can be considered for treating spasticity and neuropathic pain, further valid randomised controlled studies are needed.

Introduction

Humans have cannabinoid receptors in the central and peripheral nervous system,[1] although the functions of these receptors and the endogenous ligands may yet be unclear. In animal testing cannabinoids reduce the hyperalgesia and allodynia associated with formalin, capsaicin, carrageenan, nerve injury, and visceral persistent pain.[2] The hope then is that exogenous cannabis or cannabinoid may work as analgesics in pain syndromes that are poorly managed. The spasms of multiple sclerosis and resistant neuropathic pain are two obvious targets.

The background to this debate about legitimising cannabis (also called marijuana)—from the plant *Cannabis sativa*—for analgesic use is that the drug has been used both therapeutically and recreationally for thousands of years.[3] In Britain doctors were able to prescribe cannabis as recently as 1971,[4] and in a 1994 survey 74% of UK doctors wanted cannabis to be available on prescription, as it had been until 1971.[5]

Cannabis is used recreationally because of the euphoria that it produces. The adverse psychological effects (including psychomotor and cognitive impairment; anxiety and panic attacks; and acute psychosis and paranoia) may limit therapeutic use.[6] Other adverse physical effects include dry mouth, blurred vision, palpitations, tachycardia, and postural hypotension.[3]

Decisions about therapeutic cannabinoids, either about medical availability or about future research, should be based on the best available evidence of efficacy, safety, and tolerability. This systematic review was designed to provide that evidence for cannabinoids used as analgesics.

Methods

Searching

Two authors searched independently, using different search strategies in Medline (1966-99), Embase (1974-99), the Oxford Pain Database (1950-94),[7] and the Cochrane Library (1999, issue 3). The most recent search was done in October 1999. The search included different combinations of the following MeSH headings and "free text" terms: marijuana, marihuana, mariuana, cannabis, cannabinoids, THC, delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, nabilone, pain, analgesia, and random*. Additional reports were identified from the reference lists of retrieved reports and review articles. The search included data in any language. Only full

Editorial by Kalso

Pain Management Centre, Undercroft, South Block, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham NG7 2UH
Fiona A Campbell *consultant in anaesthetics and pain management*

Division d'Anesthésiologie, Département APSIC, Hôpitaux Universitaires, CH-1211 Genève 14, Switzerland
Martin R Tramèr *staff anaesthetist*

Pain Research, Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics, The Churchill, Oxford Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford OX3 7LJ
Dawn Carroll *senior research nurse*
R Andrew Moore *consultant biochemist*
Henry J McQuay *professor of pain relief*

Department of Clinical Pharmacology, Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford OX2 6HE
D John M Reynolds *consultant clinical pharmacologist*

Correspondence to:
F A Campbell
fiona.campbell@mail.qmcuh-tr.trent.nhs.uk

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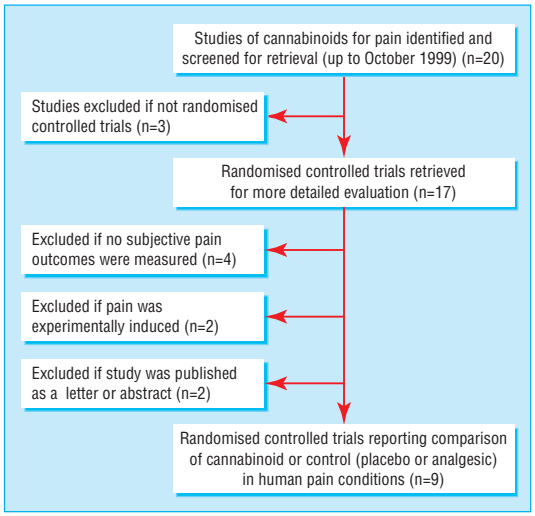

Results of search of Medline, Embase, Oxford Pain Database, Cochrane Library, references on identified papers; and hand searches for work on cannabinoids and pain

publications in peer reviewed journals were considered for inclusion in the review.

Selection and validity assessment

Randomised controlled trials of cannabis and its active constituents in human pain were sought systematically. Studies of experimental pain were excluded. Relevant papers had to report on comparisons of cannabis or cannabinoids (experimental intervention) with any analgesic or placebo (control intervention).

All potentially relevant reports that could be described as a randomised controlled trial were read independently by each of the authors and were scored for quality with the validated, 3 item Oxford scale.[8]

Data extraction

Data extraction was done by one author and cross checked by at least two other reviewers.

Results

Trial flow and study characteristics

The results of the searches are presented in the figure.

Details from nine randomised controlled trials published in seven reports between 1975 and 1997 were analysed (see table A on the *BMJ*'s website for full details).[9–15]

Four different cannabinoids were tested: oral delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) 5-10 mg,[10 11 13 14] an oral synthetic nitrogen analogue of THC (NIB) 4 mg,[12] oral benzopyranoperidine (BPP) 2-4 mg,[9] and intramuscular levonantradol 1.5-3 mg.[15] No study evaluated the analgesic effects of cannabis (marijuana) or other inhaled or smoked cannabinoids. Active treatment comparators were oral codeine 50-120 mg[9 11 12 14] and oral secobarbital 50 mg.[12]

Because of the different cannabinoids, regimens, and comparators, numerous clinical settings, different follow up periods, and a large variety of outcome measures used in these trials, pooling of data for meta-analysis was inappropriate. Results were therefore summarised qualitatively.

Five studies were on cancer pain (128 patients).[9–12] Two studies comprised two patients in total with chronic non-malignant pain,[13 14] and two trials comprised six patients with postoperative pain.[15] Follow up was six to seven hours in seven trials and six weeks and five months in the two trials on chronic non-malignant pain (which used an "n of 1 within patient crossover" design).[13 14]

Cancer pain

In the five trials on cancer pain 128 patients were studied. In one study oral benzopyranoperidine (a THC congener) 2-4 mg was not as effective as codeine sulphate 60-120 mg and no more effective than placebo in 37 patients.[9] Oral THC 5-20 mg was found to have an analgesic effect when compared with placebo in 10 patients with pain related to advanced cancer.[10] In this study a dose-response relation was shown for analgesia but also for adverse effects. In a further study by the same group oral THC 10 mg was found to be about equipotent to codeine 60 mg, and THC 20 mg was about equipotent to codeine 120 mg.[11] The higher dose was associated with unacceptable adverse effects. In one trial a synthetic nitrogen analogue of THC given orally was superior to placebo and equivalent to about 50 mg of codeine phosphate.[12] In a second study in the same report this nitrogen analogue was found to be superior to placebo and to 50 mg of secobarbital.[12] In both of these trials the nitrogen analogue of THC was felt to be not clinically useful because of the frequency of adverse effects.

Chronic non-malignant pain

Two patients were studied in two "n of 1 within patient crossover" trials for six weeks and five months respectively. In an experienced cannabis user with familial Mediterranean fever, THC was found to be no better than placebo in terms of visual analogue scores for pain intensity.[13] Level of morphine use for breakthrough pain was significantly lower, however, while the patient was taking THC than while taking placebo (170 mg *v* 410 mg per three weeks). In a patient with neuropathic pain and spasticity secondary to a spinal cord ependymoma, THC 5 mg and codeine 50 mg were equianalgesic, and both were superior to placebo.[14] Only THC, however, had a beneficial effect on spasticity.

Postoperative pain

Thirty six patients were studied in two trials (conducted as a two phase study).[15] Levonantradol was more effective than placebo when given intramuscularly to patients with postoperative pain.[15] Adverse effects with levonantradol were common, although considered mild.

Cannabinoids and adverse effects

Adverse effects were reported in all studies. Two patients withdrew from studies owing to adverse effects of THC.[11] THC showed a dose-response relation for adverse effects—for example, mental clouding, ataxia, dizziness, numbness, disorientation, disconnected thought, slurred speech, muscle twitching, impaired memory, dry mouth, and blurred vision—and at 20 mg was highly sedating in 100% of patients, thus prohibiting its use.[11] THC 10 mg was better tolerated, but the frequency of these adverse effects was still higher than with codeine 60 mg or 120 mg.[11] Reductions in arterial blood pressure occurred compared with placebo, but no more than with codeine. Changes in heart rate were

not significant. THC 5 mg was well tolerated in neuropathic pain and did not cause an altered state of consciousness.[14] Levonantradol caused adverse effects in most patients, but none withdrew.[15] The nitrogen analogue of THC did not affect heart rate but caused drowsiness in 40% of patients and was therefore deemed not clinically useful.[12] Benzopyranoperidine caused a similar degree of sedation to codeine but was ineffective as an analgesic.[9]

Discussion

We found nine randomised trials evaluating the analgesic efficacy and safety of cannabinoids. These trials, of either acute or chronic pain, suggest that little useful analgesia can be expected from single dose cannabis in nociceptive pain.

All the trials had a quality score of 3 or above and therefore are unlikely to be biased. They were predominantly single dose experiments. In eight of the nine trials intramuscular and oral cannabinoids were more effective analgesics than placebo but no more effective than oral codeine 50-120 mg.

Acute pain

In the two postoperative pain trials levonantradol was superior to placebo but no more effective than codeine.[15] Such a level of efficacy makes cannabinoids unlikely to be useful, certainly for moderate or severe postoperative pain. Meta-analyses of single dose studies in patients with acute pain found that the number needed to treat for at least 50% pain relief ranged from 2 to 5 compared with placebo for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and paracetamol. The number needed to treat for codeine 60 mg was much less useful, at 16.[16] If cannabinoids can deliver analgesia only equivalent to codeine 60 mg, with a presumed number needed to treat of about 16 for at least 50% pain relief, they are unlikely to have a place in acute pain treatment.

Cancer and non-malignant pain

No large trials examined cannabinoids in cancer pain and chronic non-malignant pain. Only two trials had treatment group sizes of more than 30.[9 11] All five trials in cancer pain were single dose, and four found the cannabinoid as effective as codeine, but with dose limiting adverse effects.[10–12] We found no trials evaluating smoked cannabis for pain management, but one trial compared the effect of smoked marijuana with smoked placebo on postural balance in patients with spastic multiple sclerosis.[17] The smoked marijuana was associated with subjective improvement of symptoms and with objectively measured impaired posture and balance in all subjects.

Adverse effects

Adverse effects associated with the cannabinoids were common and sometimes severe in six of the eight trials that showed efficacy. The predominant adverse effect seemed to be depression of the central nervous system. Cardiovascular effects were generally mild and well tolerated. Levonantradol was commonly associated with adverse effects (predominantly drowsiness or sedation, or both), of which over half were considered to be moderate or severe. THC 10-20 mg showed a dose-response relation for adverse effects, with depressant effects on the central nervous system occurring in most patients receiving either dose. In Holdcroft et al's patient[13] no adverse effects were attributable to THC 50 mg a day, but the patient was an experienced cannabis user. Maurer et al's patient experienced no altered state of consciousness taking THC 5 mg for neuropathic pain; the cannabinoids might be stimulant at low doses and depressant at higher doses, and perhaps this was the reason for lack of sedation in this patient.[14] The nitrogen analogue of THC had a side effect profile similar to codeine.[12] This cannabinoid was as sedating as secobarbital, which has no analgesic properties, thus it is unlikely that any sedation caused by cannabinoids contributes to their analgesic effect. Other studies have shown that barbiturates and tranquillisers given with analgesics contribute nothing to pain relief.[18]

What is already known on this topic

Three quarters of British doctors surveyed in 1994 wanted cannabis available on prescription

Humans have cannabinoid receptors in the central and peripheral nervous system

In animal testing cannabinoids are analgesic and reduce signs of neuropathic pain

Some evidence exists that cannabinoids may be analgesic in humans

What this study adds

No studies have been conducted on smoked cannabis

Cannabinoids give about the same level of pain relief as codeine in acute postoperative pain

They depress the central nervous system

Conclusion

The best that can be achieved with single dose cannabis in nociceptive pain is analgesia equivalent to single dose codeine 60 mg, which rates poorly on relative efficacy compared with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or simple analgesics. Increasing the cannabinoid dose to increase the analgesia will increase adverse effects. More intriguing perhaps than these relatively negative analgesic results in nociceptive pain are the suggestions of efficacy in spasticity and in neuropathic pain, where the therapeutic need is greater than in postoperative pain.

We found insufficient evidence to support the introduction of cannabinoids into widespread clinical practice for pain management—although the absence of evidence of effect is not the same as the evidence of absence of effect. Any research agenda needs to be clear, however, and this review may be helpful in defining the agenda. Cannabis is clearly unlikely to usurp existing effective treatments for postoperative pain. New safe and effective agonists at the cannabinoid receptor may dissociate therapeutic from psychotropic effects and make randomised comparisons in neuropathic pain and spasticity worth while.

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Contributors: FAC, MRT, and DC initiated the project and searched, extracted, and analysed the data. DJMR, RAM, and HJMcQ cross checked the extracted data. All authors participated in discussing the results and in writing the paper. FAC is the guarantor for the paper.

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Cannabinoids for control of chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting: quantitative systematic review

Martin R Tramèr, Dawn Carroll, Fiona A Campbell, D John M Reynolds, R Andrew Moore, Henry J McQuay

Editorial by Kalso

Division d'Anesthésiologie, Département Anesthésiologie, Pharmacologie Clinique et Soins Intensif de Chirurgie, Hôpitaux Universitaires, CH-1211 Genève 14, Switzerland
Martin R Tramèr *staff anaesthetist*

Pain Research, Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics, Churchill, Oxford Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford OX3 7LJ
Dawn Carroll *senior research nurse*
R Andrew Moore *consultant biochemist*
Henry J McQuay *professor of pain relief*

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Abstract

Objective To quantify the antiemetic efficacy and adverse effects of cannabis used for sickness induced by chemotherapy.
Design Systematic review.
Data sources Systematic search (Medline, Embase, Cochrane library, bibliographies), any language, to August 2000.
Studies 30 randomised comparisons of cannabis with placebo or antiemetics from which dichotomous data on efficacy and harm were available (1366 patients). Oral nabilone, oral dronabinol (tetrahydrocannabinol), and intramuscular levonantradol were tested. No cannabis was smoked. Follow up lasted 24 hours.
Results Cannabinoids were more effective antiemetics than prochlorperazine, metoclopramide, chlorpromazine, thiethylperazine, haloperidol, domperidone, or alizapride: relative risk 1.38 (95% confidence interval 1.18 to 1.62), number needed to treat 6 for complete control of nausea; 1.28 (1.08 to 1.51), NNT 8 for complete control of vomiting. Cannabinoids were not more effective in patients receiving very low or very high emetogenic chemotherapy. In crossover trials, patients preferred cannabinoids for future chemotherapy cycles: 2.39 (2.05 to 2.78), NNT 3. Some potentially beneficial side effects occurred more often with cannabinoids: "high" 10.6 (6.86 to 16.5), NNT 3; sedation or drowsiness 1.66 (1.46 to 1.89), NNT 5; euphoria 12.5 (3.00 to 52.1), NNT 7. Harmful side effects also occurred more often with cannabinoids: dizziness 2.97 (2.31 to 3.83), NNT 3; dysphoria or depression 8.06 (3.38 to 19.2), NNT 8; hallucinations 6.10 (2.41 to 15.4), NNT 17; paranoia 8.58 (6.38 to 11.5), NNT 20; and arterial hypotension 2.23 (1.75 to 2.83), NNT 7. Patients given cannabinoids were more likely to withdraw due to side effects 4.67 (3.07 to 7.09), NNT 11.
Conclusions In selected patients, the cannabinoids tested in these trials may be useful as mood enhancing adjuvants for controlling chemotherapy related sickness. Potentially serious adverse effects, even when taken short term orally or intramuscularly, are likely to limit their widespread use.

Introduction

Sections of the medical establishment have pleaded for legalisation of cannabis (marijuana) for medical use.[1 2] Interest in cannabis and its active constituents, cannabinoids, as therapeutic agents has increased recently.[3] Dronabinol (Δ^9-tetrahydrocannabinol, one of the main ingredients in cannabis) and the synthetic cannabinoid compound nabilone are available by prescription in some countries.

A Medline search using the terms cannabis, cannabinoids, marijuana, and marijuana smoking found 6059 articles from 1975 to 1996; most were on the antiemetic properties of cannabis.[4] Surveys of oncologists' choices of treatment for emesis caused by chemotherapy came to divergent results.[4] In one, 63% of responding oncologists agreed with the statement affirming the efficacy of cannabis for treatment of