

Greeting Benefits Connect Community,

Starseed Medicinal is excited to share insights on the latest research regarding how medicinal cannabis could shape our approach to healthcare benefits.

1. **Alternative to pharmaceuticals:** In conditions including arthritis, neuropathy, fibromyalgia, and multiple sclerosis, medicinal cannabis is emerging as an alternative to traditional pharmaceuticals for managing pain and its co-occurring symptoms, such as anxiety and sleep.

Clinical practice guidelines recommend medicinal cannabis as either a sole treatment or as an adjunct therapy for individuals experiencing chronic pain. These guidelines prioritize improving chronic pain outcomes, overall functionality, and secondary outcomes such as sleep quality, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, these recommendations underscore the benefits of medicinal cannabis over potential adverse effects associated with conventional pain medications like opioids and SNRIs, including constipation, appetite loss, mental confusion, emotional dampening, hemorrhoids, and substance use disorders¹.

Furthermore, observational studies have shown that the most common types of medications that were displaced with medicinal cannabis include opioids, benzodiazepines, NSAIDs, gabapentinoids, disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs, SNRIs, and SSRIs².

2. **Improvement in quality of life:** Many medicinal cannabis patients report enhanced quality of life due to reduced pain, increased mobility, and improved sleep patterns.

A large study with more than 3,000 patients found that using medicinal cannabis made people feel better in all 8 areas of their health and quality of life. Patients' scores on a health survey went up by 6.60 to 18.31 points with medicinal cannabis treatment³.

3. **Chronic pain and opioid-related harms:** Chronic pain and opioid-related harms are a significant concern within certain work environments. For instance, the construction industry contributes to a substantial portion, ranging from 30% to 50% of opioid-related fatalities in Ontario workplaces. Workers grappling with opioid use disorder (OUD) miss an average of 29 days per year. Many workers attribute their drug use to the physical strain of their occupations. A report by Public

¹ Bell, A. D., MacCallum, C. A., Margolese, S., Walsh, Z., Wright, P., Daeninck, P. J., Mandarino, E., Lacasse, G., Jagpaul Kaur Deol, Lauren de Freitas, Michelle St Pierre, Belle-Isle, L., Gagnon, M., Bevan, S., Sanchez, T., Arlt, S., Monahan-Ellison, M., O'Hara, J., Boivin, M., & Costiniuk, C. T. (2023). Clinical Practice Guidelines for Cannabis and Cannabinoid-Based Medicines in the Management of Chronic Pain and Co-Occurring Conditions. *Cannabis and Cannabinoid Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1089/can.2021.0156>

² Kvamme, S. L., Pedersen, M. M., Rømer Thomsen, K., & Thylstrup, B. (2021). Exploring the use of cannabis as a substitute for prescription drugs in a convenience sample. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-021-00520-5>

³ Arkell, T. R., Downey, L. A., Hayley, A. C., & Roth, S. (2023). Assessment of Medical Cannabis and Health-Related Quality of Life. *JAMA Network Open*, 6(5), e2312522. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.12522>

Health Ontario states that 78% of overdose-related deaths were preceded by a diagnosis of injury or pain, mainly fractures, dislocations, strains or sprains, as well as low back pain^{4, 5, 6, 7}.

Furthermore, the enactment of medicinal cannabis laws has yielded a decrease in opioid prescriptions across various U.S. jurisdiction where it has been implemented. Notably, there was a significant 24.8% reduction in opioid overdose deaths, coupled with an anticipated 19.5% decrease in workplace fatalities^{8, 9}.

4. **Compensation patterns:** Worker compensation claims demonstrated a 7% reduction in states where medical cannabis had been legalized. This effect was even more pronounced among older adults, with a notable decline of 13%. Furthermore, states with recreational cannabis laws witnessed a substantial 20% decrease in claims among older adults¹⁰.
5. **Health benefits for older workers:** Research suggests that medicinal cannabis might offer numerous health benefits for older individuals, including pain management, sleep improvement, and alleviation of symptoms associated with chronic conditions.

The adoption of medicinal cannabis laws in the U.S. has been associated with improved health outcomes and increased engagement in the labour force among older adults. This implies potential positive impacts on both health and economic engagement within this demographic, potentially contributing to improved health outcomes while extending the work participation of older adults¹¹.

Consider Medicinal Cannabis as a Health Benefit

Considering these findings, it's important for employers and health benefit providers to remain open to evolving healthcare options. By exploring the inclusion of medicinal cannabis coverage as part of employee health benefit plans, we can address the unique needs of our aging workforce while providing a potential avenue for enhanced wellbeing.

⁴ Gomes, T. *et al.* Changing Circumstances Surrounding Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Ontario Drug Policy Research Network / The office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario / Ontario Forensic Pathology Service / Public Health Ontario. May 2021.

⁵ Goplerud, E., Hodge, S., & Benham, T. (2017). A substance use cost calculator for US employers with an emphasis on prescription pain medication misuse. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 59(11), 1063-1071.

⁶ Public Health Ontario. (2022). Construction workers disproportionately impacted by opioid-related deaths, report find. Retrieved from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/About/News/2022/Construction-workers-opioid-related-deaths>

⁷ Benedict, G. Sabbagh, A., & Conermann, T. (2022). Medical cannabis used as an alternative treatment for chronic pain demonstrates reduction in chronic opioid use – a prospective study. *Pain Physician*, 25(1), E113-E119.

⁸ Bradford, A. C., Bradford, W. D., Abraham, A., & Adams, G. B. (2018). Association Between US State Medical Cannabis Laws and Opioid Prescribing in the Medicare Part D Population. *JAMA Internal Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2018.0266>

⁹ Wen, H., & Hockenberry, J. M. (2018). Association of Medical and Adult-Use Marijuana Laws With Opioid Prescribing for Medicaid Enrollees. *JAMA Internal Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2018.1007>

¹⁰ Abouk, R., Ghimire, K., Maclean, C., & Powell, D. (2021). Does Marijuana Legalization Affect Work Capacity? Evidence from Workers' Compensation Benefits. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3785805>

¹¹ Nicholas, L. H., & Maclean, J. C. (2019). THE EFFECT OF MEDICAL MARIJUANA LAWS ON THE HEALTH AND LABOR SUPPLY OF OLDER ADULTS: EVIDENCE FROM THE HEALTH AND RETIREMENT STUDY. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22122>

Looking Ahead

We encourage open conversations among our community members about the evolving landscape of healthcare options. While the inclusion of medicinal cannabis coverage on health benefit plans is a complex decision that requires careful consideration, it is exciting to see the possibilities that can arise from innovative approaches to supporting our workforce's well-being.

[Link to Starseed's Blog]

For additional information on Starseed's Patient Support Program or to learn more about medicinal cannabis as a paid health benefit, please contact the Starseed team at partners@starseed.com.