

Cannabis in Hospice and Palliative Care Settings

Cannabis vs. Opioids and Quality of Life

A Patient-Centered Approach to Cannabis Use in Hospice and Palliative Care

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Shaping the Future of Medicinal Cannabis in Oregon since 2013

Cannabis in Hospice and Palliative Care Settings: Cannabis vs. Opioids

Using cannabis in end-of-life care offers several potential advantages compared to opioids, depending on the patient's needs, preferences, and medical circumstances. Here are some key considerations:

Advantages of Cannabis in End-of-Life Care

- Pain Management with Less Risk of Respiratory Depression: Cannabis provides effective pain relief, particularly for neuropathic and chronic pain, without causing respiratory depression—a common and potentially fatal side effect of opioids.
- Fewer Side Effects for Some Patients: Common opioid side effects like constipation, confusion, and sedation can be distressing. Cannabis may provide symptom relief with fewer or more manageable side effects.
- Non-Additive Effects with Opioids: Cannabis can be used alongside opioids to provide enhanced pain relief, potentially allowing for lower doses of opioids and reducing opioid-related side effects.
- Improved Quality of Life: Cannabis can address multiple symptoms simultaneously, including pain, nausea, anxiety, and loss of appetite, potentially reducing the need for multiple medications.
- Reduction of Nausea and Vomiting: Cannabis is effective in controlling nausea and vomiting, especially in patients undergoing chemotherapy or dealing with gastrointestinal discomfort.
- Appetite Stimulation: Cannabis, particularly strains high in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), is known to stimulate appetite ("the munchies"), which can be crucial for patients experiencing severe weight loss or cachexia.
- Anxiety and Mood Improvement: Cannabis can help reduce anxiety, promote relaxation, and improve mood, providing emotional comfort for patients and their families.
- Lower Risk of Dependency and Overdose: Unlike opioids, cannabis has a much lower risk of physical dependency or fatal overdose, which can be a significant concern in end-of-life care.
- Potential for Lower Sedation: While both cannabis and opioids can cause sedation, cannabis might allow patients to remain more alert and engaged with loved ones during their final days, depending on the dosage and strain used.
- Preference for Plant-Based Medicine: Some patients prefer using plant-based or natural remedies like cannabis over synthetic opioids for personal, cultural, or philosophical reasons.

Cannabis in Hospice Care: A Quality-of-Life Focus

In hospice care, the primary goal is not curative treatment but enhancing the quality of life for individuals facing terminal illnesses. This holistic approach prioritizes comfort, dignity, and emotional well-being, making cannabis a valuable tool in addressing the multifaceted challenges of end-of-life care.

Symptom Relief with Minimal Burden: Cannabis offers relief for common hospice symptoms, including chronic pain, nausea, anxiety, and loss of appetite, without some of the severe side effects associated

with traditional medications like opioids. By managing these symptoms effectively, cannabis enables patients to experience greater comfort with fewer physical and cognitive burdens.

Enhanced Emotional Well-Being: Hospice patients often grapple with emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and fear. Cannabis, particularly strains high in cannabidiol (CBD), can help promote relaxation and reduce anxiety, fostering a sense of peace and emotional stability during this challenging time.

Facilitating Connection and Presence: Excessive sedation from traditional pain management options like opioids can prevent patients from being fully present with their loved ones. Cannabis, when used appropriately, allows patients to remain alert and engaged, helping them create meaningful memories and connections in their final days.

Improved Appetite and Nutrition: Many hospice patients experience anorexia or cachexia, leading to weight loss and physical weakness. Cannabis, particularly tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)-dominant strains, is known for its appetite-stimulating effects, enabling patients to maintain better nutrition and strength.

A Patient-Centered, Non-Stigmatizing Option: For patients who prefer natural or plant-based remedies, cannabis offers a compassionate, patient-centered option. It aligns with the hospice philosophy of respecting individual preferences and choices in their care journey.

Holistic Comfort: Cannabis provides multi-symptom relief in a single therapeutic agent, often reducing the need for a cocktail of medications. This minimizes the side effects and interactions associated with polypharmacy, offering a more streamlined and holistic approach to symptom management.

Conclusion

Cannabis is more than a medication in hospice care; it is a tool to enhance quality of life, allowing patients to face the end of life with greater comfort, dignity, and connection. By integrating cannabis into hospice care protocols, healthcare providers can honor the unique needs of patients and support their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being during their final chapter.

Comments:

Louisiana, Montana, and New Mexico are currently the only states that specifically list “hospice care” as a qualifying condition for medical marijuana use. Providing facilities and organizations to adopt policy for its use.