

# SENIORS

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## Medical marijuana's 'catch-22'

### Federal limits on research hinder patients' relief

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By the time Ann Marie Owen turned to marijuana to treat her pain, she was struggling to walk and talk. She also hallucinated.

For four years, her doctor prescribed the 61-year-old a wide range of opioids for her transverse myelitis, a debilitating disease that caused pain, muscle weakness and paralysis.

The drugs not only failed to ease her symptoms, they hooked her.

When her home state of New York legalized marijuana for the treatment of select medical ailments, Owens decided it was time to swap pills for pot. But her doctors refused to help.

"Even though medical marijuana is legal, none of my doctors were willing to talk to me about it," she said. "They just kept telling me to take opioids."

While 29 states have legalized marijuana to treat pain and other ailments, the growing number of Americans like Owen who use marijuana and the doctors who treat them are caught in the middle of a conflict in federal and state laws — a predicament that is only worsened by thin scientific data.

Because the federal government classifies marijuana a Schedule 1 drug — by definition a substance with no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse — research on marijuana or its active ingredients is highly restricted and even discouraged in some cases.

Underscoring the federal government's position, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar recently pronounced that there was "no such thing as medical marijuana."

Scientists say that stance prevents them from conducting the high-quality research required for FDA approval, even as some early research indicates marijuana might be a promising alternative to opioids or other medicines.

Patients and physicians, meanwhile, lack guidance when making decisions about medical treatment for an array of serious conditions.

"We have the federal government and the state governments driving a hundred miles an hour in the opposite direction when they should be coming together to obtain more sci-



COURTESY PHOTO | LIBRE STOCK

Twenty-nine states have legalized marijuana to treat pain and other ailments.

entific data," said Dr. Orrin Devinsky, who is researching the effects of cannabidiol, an active ingredient of marijuana, on epilepsy. "It's like saying in 1960, 'We're not going to the moon because no one agrees how to get there.'"

The problem stems partly from the fact that the federal government's restrictive marijuana research policies have not been overhauled in more than 40 years, researchers say.

Only one federal government contractor grows marijuana for federally funded research. Researchers complain the pot grown by the contractor at the University of Mississippi is inadequate for high-quality studies.

The marijuana, which comes in a micronized powder form, is less potent than the pot offered at dispensaries, researchers say. It also differs from other products offered at dispensaries, such as so-called edibles that are eaten like snacks. The difference makes it difficult to compare the real-life effects of the marijuana compounds.

Researchers also face time-consuming and costly hurdles in completing the complicated federal application process for using marijuana in long-term clinical trials.

"It's public policy before science," said Dr. Chinazo Cunningham, a primary care doctor who is the lead investigator on one of the few federally funded studies exploring marijuana as a treatment for pain. "The federal government's policies really make it much more difficult."

Cunningham, who received a five-year, \$3.8

million federal grant, will not be administering marijuana directly to participants. Instead, she will follow 250 HIV-positive and HIV-negative adults with chronic pain who use opioids and have been certified to get medical marijuana from a dispensary.

"It's a catch-22," said Cunningham, who is with the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. "We're going to be looking at all of these issues — age, disease, level of pain — but when we're done, there's the danger that people are going to say 'Oh, it's anecdotal' or that it's inherently flawed because it's not a randomized trial."

Without clear answers, hospitals, doctors and patients are left to their own devices, which can result in poor treatment and needless suffering.

Hospitals and other medical facilities have to decide what to do with newly hospitalized patients who normally take medical marijuana at home.

Some have a "don't ask, don't tell" approach, said Devinsky, who sometimes advises his patients to use it. Others ban its use and substitute opioids or other prescriptions.

Young adults, for instance, have had to stop taking cannabidiol compounds for their epilepsy because they're in federally funded group homes, said Devinsky, the director of NYU Langone's Comprehensive Epilepsy Center.

"These kids end up getting seizures again," he said. "This whole situation has created a hodgepodge of insanity."

The Trump administration, however, has resisted policy changes.

Last year, the Drug Enforcement Administration had been gearing up to allow facilities other than the University of Mississippi to grow pot for research. But after the DEA received 26 applications from other growers, Attorney General Jeff Sessions halted the initiative.

The Department of Veterans Affairs also recently announced it would not fund studies of using marijuana compounds to treat ailments such as pain.

The DEA and HHS have cited concerns about medical supervision, addiction and a lack of "well-controlled studies proving efficacy."

Patients, meanwhile, forge ahead.

While experts say they don't know exactly how many older Americans rely on marijuana for medicinal purposes, the number of

Americans 65 and older who say they are using the drug skyrocketed 250 percent from 2006 to 2013.

Some patients turn to friends, patient advocacy groups or online support groups for information.

Owen, for one, kept searching for a doctor and eventually found a neurologist willing to certify her to use marijuana and advise her on what to take.

"It's saved my life," said the retired university administrative assistant who credited marijuana for weaning her off opioids. "It not only helps my pain, but I can think, walk and talk again."

Mary Jo, a Minnesotan, was afraid of being identified as a medical marijuana user, even though she now helps friends navigate the process and it's legal in her home state.

"There's still a stigma," said Mary Jo, who found it effective for treating her pain from a nerve condition. "Nobody helps you figure it out, so you kind of play around with it on your own."

Still, doctors and scientists worry about the implications of such experimentation.

In a sweeping report last year, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine called on the federal government to support better research, decrying the "lack of definitive evidence on using medical marijuana."

The national academies' committee reviewed more than 10,000 scientific abstracts related to the topic.

It made 100 conclusions based on its review, including finding evidence that marijuana relieves pain and chemotherapy-induced nausea. But it found "inadequate information" to support or refute effects on Parkinson's disease.

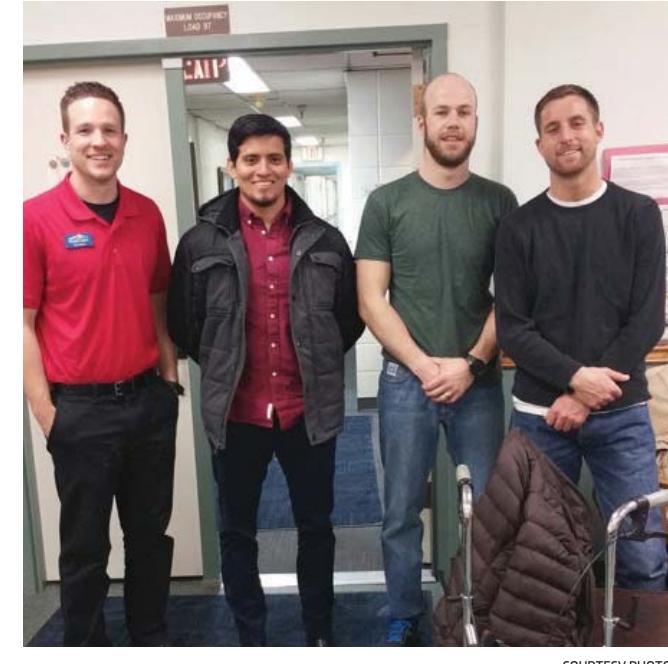
Yet those who find that medical marijuana helps them can become fierce advocates no matter what their doctors say.

Caryl Barrett, a 54-year-old who lives in Georgia, said she decided to travel out of state to Colorado to treat her pain from her transverse myelitis and the autoimmune disease sarcoidosis.

"I realized it worked and I decided to bring it back with me," she said. "I broke federal law."

Georgia, meanwhile, permitted limited medicinal use of marijuana but did not set up dispensaries. As a result, patients resort to ordering it online or driving to another state to get it.

The conflict in the law makes her uneasy.



COURTESY PHOTO |

The "Game Boys," from left, Tyler Jensen, Rafael Hernandez, Luke Sommers and Joey Kozlowski helped start a game night at Heritage Towers. Not pictured is Grant DeRocher.

## Celebrating, recruiting volunteers for The Hub

Last week was National Volunteer Week, during which communities and organizations across the nation celebrated volunteers and the work they accomplish. Established in 1974, National Volunteer Week has grown with each passing year. Volunteer projects and special recognition events are held throughout the week to celebrate the impact of volunteers and hopefully inspire others to serve.

The Hub on Smith was bustling with activity as it celebrated the Keystone and Keys to the Stone honorees April 19, along with taking an opportunity to thank 350 Hub volunteers throughout the week. The Hub will host a larger event this fall to honor its hard working volunteers.

Hub volunteers serve in many different ways and for many different reasons. Volunteer voices from the Hub commented on their reasons to volunteer: they believe in the mission and want to make a difference in supporting the Hub's work; they want to give back to the organization that helped in their time of need; or simply, they feel it's the right thing to do. Some of our volunteers are seeking a desire to meet others, to be part of a team or learn a new skill.

May 1, one of The Hub's longtime volunteers, LeRoy Johnson, will be honored as a finalist for the Jefferson Award at a luncheon in Casper.

The Jefferson Award honors those in volunteer service that have gone above and beyond. Johnson is a humble community volunteer that sees what needs to be done and does it. He volunteers two days a week delivering meals to homebound seniors, serves coffee and converses with vets at the VA on Thursdays and helps in many capacities at his church. We are honored to have Johnson in our community.

The Hub has many opportunities for volunteering. The majority of the volunteer jobs fall during the day, but special events and evening activities utilize volunteers from time to time.

One such volunteer group approached me in the fall with an idea of serving our seniors once a month. This group of five young men is in a book group that meets Tuesday evenings, and they decided they wanted to do a volunteer activity on one of the Tuesdays. The idea of a game night at Heritage Towers was born.

Once a month, the group, now called "The Game Boys," organizes board games and activities for the seniors living at the towers. Friendly competition and social interaction are just a few of the positive outcomes from this simple idea, which came from the volunteers.

As we move into May, I will be recruiting students for our summer "Volunteer" program. Students as young as 13 may apply to be a Hub volunteer. If you or someone you know is interested in joining our team as a Hub volunteer, please contact me or stop by The Hub at 211 Smith St. and we can visit.

TERRI HAYDEN is the director of volunteer services at The Hub on Smith.

### SENIOR HAPPENINGS |

The Young At Heart Players, under the direction of Pat Tomsovic, has put out a call for actors for April 24 at 9:30 a.m. at The Hub on Smith. The next script being considered is a radio play written by Bruce Scigliani. The group is considering a production that requires no memorization and is always looking for new members to join.

Join The Hub on Smith for its annual Eatons' Ranch lunch trip set for May 9. After lunch, the group will have time to explore the beautiful sites. The group will depart from Heritage Towers, The Hub and Tongue River Valley Community Center. Call The Hub's front desk at (307) 672-2240, ext. 133, for additional information. Reservation and payment should be made by May 2.

The Hub has organized a May Basket Craft Day for May 1 from 10-11 a.m. Bring your basket to decorate or help yourself to our supplies. Those planning to participate are encouraged to sign up by calling (307) 672-2240.

**FUN AND FOOD**  
**BUILD YOUR OWN SALAD**  
Mondays - Fridays  
Entrees and kiosk include sides, dessert and drink.

**Salad Bar Available**  
Mondays - Fridays  
No Salad Bar on Saturday or Sunday

\*entrée only offered for Home Delivered Meals

#### UPCOMING SPECIAL EVENTS

Community Room  
Billiard Room  
Café  
Tech Nook

Tue- Young at Heart Players/Call for Actors 9:30 a.m.

Wed- Pool Tournament 9:00 a.m.

Thurs- Trivia Thursdays 12:00 p.m.

Fri- Dominoes Mexican Train 1:00 p.m.

Sat- Covey Run Craft Show 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Mon- Double Deck Pinochle 12:30p.m.

Lunch Service Hours: 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., 365 days a year at 211 Smith Street

Home Delivered Meals (307) 672-6079

Loan Closet, Outreach, and Administration Services, 672-2240. Mondays - Fridays.

Help at Home Services, 675-1978. 232 North Brooks: Mondays - Fridays.

Day Break Adult Care Services, 674-4968. 241 Smith Street: Mondays - Fridays.