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## Ask the Expert Information Sheet

### Medical Cannabis and Brain Tumours

*By: Dr. Lynda Balneaves*

#### Author:

Dr. Balneaves is President of the Society for Integrative Medicine (SIO) and Deputy Director of the Canadian Consortium for the Investigation of Cannabinoids.

Dr. Balneaves is interested in the use of complementary therapies in the context of cancer. Her specific research focus has been on the development and evaluation of knowledge translation and decision support interventions for individuals living with cancer and oncology health professionals. Dr. Balneaves has been active in health services research related to the use and access to medical cannabis in Canada.

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Controversial, stigmatized, medical breakthrough, depending on who you talk to, medical cannabis can be one or more of those things. We wondered what the latest research says about cannabis? Plus, with the law changing in Canada on October 17, 2018 to allow the recreational use of cannabis, we wondered what the implications of that change will be for Canadian brain tumour patients. We sat down with an expert, Dr. Lynda Balneaves, Associate Professor of the College of Nursing at the University of Manitoba, to learn more.

Medical cannabis is a hot topic, not just for individuals affected by brain tumours but for those affected by any type of cancer. Used to relieve seizures, nausea, and pain, it can also assist with sleep and for some of the symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as night terrors. There is contradictory evidence, however, if cannabis may help with the anxiety and depression experienced by some patients. Much more research is needed to understand what types of cannabis, potency and dose are most effective.

Because of its illegal status in North America, it is currently very difficult to do research into cannabis. Some of the issues that researchers encounter include access to the product (sometimes taking up to two years) and in the United States, they can only access cannabis from one federal source, that is often dried, irradiated and left on the shelf for many years. Some of the research that's been done in Canada has focussed on the role of medical cannabis for arthritis pain and spinal cord injury, as a substitute for opioids, and for addressing PTSD in veterans. In New Brunswick and Ontario, there are research centres exploring the health and social impacts of recreational cannabis.

Outside of Canada, there have been very small human trials on individuals with recurrent glioblastoma (less than 30 people), where a significant increase in survival was observed as well as reduction in tumour size. More research is urgently needed, however, to unpack the effects and see what form of cannabis and dose are most effective. These trials have also seen cannabis being used alongside chemotherapy, raising questions as to which treatment was ultimately making the difference.

Dr. Balneaves is passionate about ensuring that research into both medical and

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## Additional support, information and education offered by Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada:

Adult, Pediatric and Non-Malignant Brain Tumour Handbooks available in English and French.

"A Friend in Hope" children's storybook available in English and French.

20+ Adult Support Groups across Canada (in-person and virtual)

Toll-free information and support line

BrainWAVE Pediatric Support Program

Print BrainStorm Newsletter  
Email Newsletters:

- E-BrainStorm
- Peace of Mind

"Grey Matters" Blog

All patient resources are available free-of-charge in Canada. Call 1-800-265-5106 or visit [www.BrainTumour.ca](http://www.BrainTumour.ca) for additional details and information.

Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada is generously supported by individuals, corporations and employee groups. It is through the tireless dedication of donors that help is available for anyone affected by a brain tumour, including patients, survivors and their loved ones.

recreational cannabis takes place and that any available funding is distributed in a fair and equitable manner, so much so that she recently took on a leadership role in the Canadian Consortium for the Investigation of Cannabinoids (CCIC). She hopes that the CCIC can create a collaborative network of Canadian researchers to advance the study of cannabis.

Dr. Balneaves recognizes that as we wait for the research on medical cannabis to take place, many patients are moving forward with using cannabis to manage their side effects of treatment, and for some, to treat their cancer. **From a safety perspective, she urges patients to talk to their doctor or nurse practitioner (NP) about their cannabis use and ensure they receive regular follow-up and monitoring of any side effects.**

This can be problematic for those who are having issues finding health care professionals who are open to the use of medical cannabis, as some are only comfortable prescribing medication that has been rigorously tested through clinical trials. Dr Balneaves recommends requesting a referral to another doctor or NP who can authorize medical cannabis use as "It is essential that patients talk to their doctors or NPs to make informed, safe decisions that will work with other medication that they may be taking."

Even when recreational cannabis becomes legal in October, there are a few things that brain tumour patients should bear in mind. Medical cannabis is of a slightly higher standard in terms of microbes, fungus and mold compared to the cannabis that will be sold in the recreational market. It's essential for those with a compromised immune system to get the purest cannabis possible. Recreational cannabis may also be higher in THCs, for those wanting a "high", whereas many patients will want lower THC and higher CBD or a balanced ratio, to avoid this effect. Some patients may also want to use capsules or oils to avoid potential harms caused by inhaling cannabis and to assist with long-acting symptom management.

Many provinces already have strict rules around the use of recreational cannabis, which may also apply to those taking medical cannabis. It will be important for patients to be aware of the cannabis laws within their local area about public and private consumption.

**Dr. Balneaves will be presenting an 'Update on Cannabis and Brain Tumours' at the Brain Tumour National Conference on Saturday, October 20, 2018. This session will also be live streamed to computers across Canada for anyone unable to attend the conference in person. [www.braintumour.ca/Conference](http://www.braintumour.ca/Conference)**



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