Weeding out the Stigma: Experiences Shared by Older Veterans

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Background

Cannabis use today is the highest it has been in three decades, approaching 36.5% prevalence for past year use (Schulenberg et al., 2017).

In states where medical cannabis is legal, 41% of Veterans who used cannabis in the past year reported doing so for medical purposes and were likely to be 65 years + (Davis et al., 2018).

Research continues to point to medical cannabis as a potentially effective alternative to opioids and benzodiazepines for treating a range of medical conditions.

Baby Boomers + War on Drugs + Vietnam + Increase in recent cannabis legalization = Unique Opportunity

Methods

Surveyed 121 older veterans (60 years +) who were enrolled in the Illinois Medical Cannabis Patient Program (MCPP) during Fall 2020

Utilized maximum variation sampling to select a subset of 32 Veterans

Participants represented diversity regarding age of cannabis initiation, type of cannabis user, military branch, type of healthcare provider, and race/ethnicity

From November 2020 to February 2021, two researchers conducted 30-minute audiotaped semi-structured interviews

Interview topics included (1) use of cannabis, opioids, and benzodiazepines, (2) interactions with medical providers, (3) stigma regarding cannabis use, and (4) educational materials for older Veterans

We present findings from the third topic regarding stigma associated with using cannabis

Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes

Weekly meetings among two coders ensured the accuracy of coding procedures, reflect on biases and interpretations, and reach consensus regarding coding discrepancies

Final codebook reached an 87% inter-rater reliability

Two coders (First and Last Author) independently coded the transcripts and employed a rigorous thematic analysis approach using NVivo12 QSR

We provide the three overarching themes and exemplary quotes from a variety of participants

Participant Demographics (N = 32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (in 7.4 yo)</th>
<th>Type of Healthcare Provider</th>
<th>Type of Cannabis User</th>
<th>Age of Cannabis Initiation (x̅ = 25.8 yo)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Medical marijuana</td>
<td>21-25 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>Medicinal marijuana</td>
<td>26-30 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>CBD</td>
<td>31-35 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coast Guard</td>
<td>THC</td>
<td>36-40 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>41-45 yo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stigma Code & Overarching Themes

Stigma: Any discussion about stereotypes or stigma, worry about people noticing, or worry about the perceptions of others

Examples: If participants talk about being called a ‘pot head’ and any discussion about things such as Reefer Madness, etc.

Stereotypes regarding people who use cannabis

Hesitation of disclosing cannabis use with others

Media portrayal (e.g., movies, policy) of cannabis users

Study’s Results

"Oh of course there is a stigma. Of course.”

Stereotypes regarding people who use cannabis

“And a lot of people say you use cannabis, then you must be a stoner, you must be stoned all the time, no I'm not and I don't lose my capability” – Participant 16

"Yeah, we're still considered potheads, there's no difference between a pot user and a meth user, uh, you know, those sorts of. The ones [stereotypes] that have always been around are still around.” – Participant 4

"Well, I guess there's negative stigma with regards to people who use it because you know, for I guess they just, there's some people who just thinking, I guess, anybody who would use it is a drug addict. And I know that's not true because I've used cannabis and I'm not a drug addict. But that's, there's a stigma about that.” – Participant 13

Hesitation of disclosing cannabis use with others

"Um yes, there is [stigma]. Yes, there is. There's a lot of people out there that, you know, I live in a duplex. The person next door would frown upon me for using cannabis. So, I never smoke around the man, I never smoke around his family.” – Participant 26

"I haven't talked to anybody else about it. I haven't, other than family and friends that I told I was on it and is doing a great job.” – Participant 13

"For example, I would never talk to any of my allopathic physicians about cannabis. I once broached the topic with a psychiatrist, but again, only as a to pose the question what he thought about the potential for CBD to address anxiety, not that I'm thinking of doing A, B, or C” – Participant 19

Media portrayal of cannabis users

"Yeah, and that's the other thing I don't think people realize, is that, you know, again the whole sort of reefer madness kind of visual image pops into people’s heads like oh, my God, I'm gonna smoke that stuff, I'm going to be stumbling around, I'm going to walk outside without my clothes on and I'm not gonna remember what happened to me.” – Participant 7

"Like my parents, you know, even though they were aware of my use, but they never wanted to try it, they were still stuck in the, you know, the, the days of how it's a gateway to other drugs and has all these problems” – Participant 12

Discussion

Public stigma ➔ Self-stigma

Awareness, Agreement, Application (Fox et al., 2018)

Stigma creates situations in which older Veterans are hesitant to disclose their use of cannabis with physicians, family and/or friends which can be dangerous and also socially isolating.

Older Veterans may benefit from shared experiences about cannabis use for medical purposes, but this often does not occur.

The empirically-based insights gained from this work have the potential to inform public health leaders, healthcare administrators, and public messaging regarding the use of medical cannabis.

Limitations

Illinois-centric [Medical and Recreational laws]

Phone-interviews completed during COVID-19

Lack of women and diverse identities

Conclusions

Continue conducting research and having conversations about medical cannabis use with older U.S. Veterans

Discuss stigma and best practices with health care professionals about cannabis use (i.e., VA and community healthcare agencies)

As a society, we should work towards altering the negative narrative of cannabis use

Thank you!

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