

Dr. Mark Donaldson – Racing to Find an Alternative: Substituting Opioids with Marijuana?

Chiraz: With the legalization of marijuana, much hope rides on the ability of this substance to alleviate pain and consequently reduce or eliminate the use of opioids. Despite the lack of research on the actual effectiveness of marijuana in reducing or treating pain and on substance addiction, marijuana is considered a safer pain management option. However, the question to ponder for oral health practitioners is: are we really treating patients? Or are we simply substituting one substance with another substance, namely opioids with marijuana? And more importantly: how ethical is it to do that? I have invited Dr. Mark Donaldson to share his thoughts on this question. Dr. Donaldson is Associate Principal at Vizient Pharmacy Advisory Solutions and Professor in the Skaggs School of Pharmacy at the University of Montana. Dr. Donaldson, always a pleasure to see you and host you on Oasis, thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with our viewers.

Dr. Donaldson: Absolutely. Chiraz nice to see you again.

Chiraz: So, what are your thoughts on the question, are healthcare professionals, including dentists, Of course, simply trading one substance with for another?

Dr. Donaldson: Yeah. Great, great question; and I like this because it's a unique approach to the discussion which has been going on. you know, certainly has come to a head in many avenues where whether we're talking politics, regulation or healthcare, you know, where are we today 2018 with regards to cannabinoids? And perhaps, you know, we all know it is marijuana, but really, I think what we're talking about medical cannabinoids, maybe that's more appropriate terminology. So, is it possible that we would be, you know, basically replacing one poison with another poison? That's possible. I would say first of all, for all of our practitioners out there, we like to practice what is known as evidenced-based medicine or evidence-based dentistry. In other words, what does the research show in order for us to provide best practice, best care for our patients?

Dr. Donaldson: And unfortunately, where we are today is that we do not have, you know, that concise documentation, that meta analyses, great data in support of medical cannabinoids being an alternative to our historical opioids or better yet nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs with acetaminophen for post-operative dental pain. So, until we get that data, you know, we really shouldn't be sort of going away from what we know has been proven, what is evidence-based practice for management of post-operative pain to this unknown molecule. Now having said that, because the discussion has been very universal, certainly in the United States, as 30 states now out of the 50 here, have approved legalization of marijuana; so, we passed that overall majority. Canada also looking at this

very seriously, in fact, I think October is going to be an exciting one for Canada round about this issue. With that discussion coming to the forefront, I believe that research is now being, you know, really advanced within this area. So, more importantly, we started off talking about evidence-based medicine or evidence-based dentistry, soon that evidence should be there and once it is there, it will be much more directional and could in fact change practice. Now, I would be remiss as a healthcare practitioner if I didn't emphasize that, you know, we can never condone the smoke formulation of any medication. And, with cannabinoids through the active [inaudible], you know, we are actually introducing even more chemicals into the lung fields which is going to cause some additional pathology. However, with the research that's coming with the new potential formulations of medical cannabinoids, if we could get a standardized product that is not only considered safe but also efficacious and in a perfect world, if we could even get to the randomized clinical trials, prospective in nature, where we actually show head-to-head comparison of traditional opioids versus medical cannabinoids for post-operative dental pain.

Dr. Donaldson: I mean, now we actually have a pathway to changing practice. But I think you said it perfectly at the beginning; right now, medical science has not necessarily caught up with, you know, with the general feeling by the general population that the cannabinoids could and perhaps even should play a role in post-operative pain management. And, it's always hard to argue with that study of one, you know, that patient believes that it works in that patient, it probably does, but I think as people of medicine, we still have to be driven by the evidence and that evidence is coming. But, at this point, I just don't think that it's wise to consider changing out your opioids for cannabinoids until we have better evidence to support that and it may be coming. So, it's a great question.

Chiraz: And that's exactly the reason why we wanted to bring it to the attention of our dentists. So, a lot to think about and just food for thought for the moment. Waiting until we get more research and evidence. Thank you so much Dr. Donaldson as usual for taking the time to speak with me and to be here for our Canadian dentists.

Dr. Donaldson: Of course.