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Tens of thousands of Arkansans are registered medical marijuana users, but little is known about how they are consuming the drug and to what effect. Researchers with Arkansas Center for Health Improvement in collaboration with University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences have launched a three-year study to find out.

Jacqueline Froelich reports.

Web: <https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/programs-services/topics/medical-marijuana-faqs>

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/marijuana/marijuana-safe-effective-medicine>

V1 Arkansas' medical marijuana industry, comprised of 36 dispensaries and a half dozen cultivation facilities is regulated by a state commission. More than 60,000 pounds of medical marijuana have been sold, valued at over \$400 million dollars.

The Arkansas Department of Health issues medical marijuana registry cards to physician-qualified patients to legally purchase the drug, to treat one of 18 state-approved medical conditions, including cancer, Alzheimer's Disease, neuropathy, seizure disorders, MS, PTSD, and intractable pain.

However, scant data exists in the U.S. on how Americans are using medical marijuana and to what effect.

But a newly launched study this month in Arkansas will provide groundbreaking insight.

Thomp1: "I believe this is the first study of it's kind, a population assessment for the impact of the introduction of medical marijuana in the nation."

V2 Dr. Joe Thompson is President and CEO of Arkansas Center for Health Improvement, a nonpartisan, independent health policy center headquartered in Little Rock.

He's co-principal investigator, and also principle contact for the \$1.3million dollar research grant issued by the National Institutes of Health.

Thomp2: “Our state has the ability through the e Transparency Initiative ... look at the impact of medical marijuana for all users.”

V3 The research team will also capture data from the Arkansas Department of Health medical marijuana patient registry, marijuana dispensary purchases, vital records, emergency department records, and Arkansas State Police motor vehicle crash data.

But no patient identity will be breached, Thompson says.

Thomp8: “Importantly this study will not have personally identifiable information. The Transparency Initiative uses a unique 44 character hash ID, it blinds the study’s individuals and protects their private information statewide.”

V4 Marijuana remains listed as a Schedule I drug under the Federal Controlled Substances Act, although most states have enacted laws and policies to allow for either medical or recreational cultivation, sale, distribution, and possession.

But because it’s an illegal substance, the medical properties of cannabis, the botanical name for the plant, has been vastly under-researched.

Thomp4: “We are excited about this study .... we should be able to see which strains are being purchased, offering the best impacts and outcomes for what conditions.”

V5 The research team won’t have access to consumers’ qualified medical condition however.

Thomp5: “We will be able to see what they’ve been treated for historically ... purchase of medical marijuana.”

V6 And possibly what blends of medical cannabis consumers most prefer to smoke, vape, or taken by mouth as a tincture, or gummy.

Thomp6: “Identifying what is avail, will be an important first set up steps in study ... impact on their health care.”

V7 Co-principle investigator Teresa Hudson, is a professor of psychiatry in the Psychiatric Research Institute at UAMS. She's also director of the Center for Health Services Research at PRI.

As a licensed pharmacist, Hudson knows first hand that all drugs sold by prescription in America are intensely scientifically vetted.

Hud1: "Marijuana has been a grassroots effort, not put thru rigorous clinical trials, so a fascinating way it's entered this realm of being a therapeutic option."

V8 Hudson says four years ago the National Academy of Medicine called for definitive research on what medical cannabis strains and combinations impact disease.

Hud5: "And that's still not very well defined so at least we can contribute to that literature."

V9 But she plans to survey the strains and blends of medical marijuana being dispensed in Arkansas.

Hud2: In the data we will receive to do these analyses we will know the brand names ... with medical marijuana."

V10 Consumers are not advised about contra-indications and optimal dosing by dispensary technicians, also referred to as "bud tenders." Technicians do help consumers purchase packaged types of medicinal weed – to smoke, vape or eat.

It's up to Arkansas consumers to educate themselves on how to best use the drug to treat their specific condition.

Hud3: "Because we can get down to what strains people are using ... with these diagnoses seem to buy that more."

V11 Once key anonymous data is acquired, Hudson says, researchers will measure the numbers of qualifying diagnoses among consumers, which medical marijuana remedies are being purchased, the quantity being purchased (which is monitored and limited by Arkansas Alcohol Beverage Control Board),  
And if consumers are taking too much medical marijuana.

Hudson also says no one knows if they are using less or more conventional health care, while consuming the drug.

Hud4: And the third piece is how did COVID impact this?

V12 During the pandemic, green cross physicians — those qualified by the state to approve medical cannabis consumers — were able to work via telehealth. In person consults are now required. But just how many Arkansans avoided pursuit of an ID card, and remedies due to the pandemic is not known.

Dr. Joe Thompson with Arkansas Center for Health Improvement says this state wide study on medical marijuana utilization is watershed.

Thomp7: I hope this starts a scientific inquiry, that's population based to know the true impact of medical marijuana. We don't need to have two separate streams of treatment, the medical treatment and medical mj treatment and not have those interlaced together, if there is benefit. So hopeful this does shed light on the benefits or potential harms on the introduction of medical marijuana.”

V13 The 8-member research team will not measure the recreational use of medical marijuana by those who are qualified to purchase it.

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