

KRONIC IN THE CLINIC: THE USE OF SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS BY NSW CANNABIS CLINIC CLIENTS

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Introduction and Aims: Synthetic cannabinoids (SC) simulate effects of cannabis by activating the cannabinoid-receptor; use is common among cannabis users. This study aimed to enhance our understanding of the experiences and motivations for SC use by patients seeking treatment for cannabis dependence.

Design and Methods: Participants were recruited from NSW Health Cannabis Clinics and grouped according to SC use (SC: lifetime-use of SC; Cannabis: never used SC). Structured surveys (May 2015-April 2016) were used to collect data on substance use, mental health, motivations and reasons for use/non-use of SC. Analysis was performed using Mann-Whitney U or Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests where appropriate.

Results: 154 individuals were recruited (82 SC; 72 Cannabis), predominantly male (SC 76%; Cannabis 67%), Mean age 34.8±10 years. DASS-21 stress scores were higher in SC users relative to cannabis-only users (10v6.5, $p=0.009$). Within the SC group, 26.8% used SC within the last 3-months, 35.4% within 12-months. SC users were significantly less likely to use SC for coping (8v14, $p<0.001$), social (6.5v9, $p=0.005$), pleasure enhancement (11v13, $p=0.014$) and mental health (0v2, $p<0.001$) reasons compared to cannabis. Enhanced intoxication was the primary motivation to use SC (37/81; 45.7%), curiosity most frequently reported for initial use (18/82, 22%) and intoxicating effects for subsequent use (13/72, 18%). Only 11% (9/82) preferred SC; all participants felt cannabis was safer than SC. Others negative reports discouraged SC use amongst cannabis-only participants (37/72, 51%).

Discussion and Conclusions: SC use is still common amongst treatment-seeking cannabis users. Self-reported stress is higher in SC users. Motives for use differ to that for cannabis. Importantly, awareness of associated harms may influence against use in SC naïve individuals.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Despite restrictions on availability, SC remains a significant health concern. This study further highlights the need to develop appropriate harm reduction interventions and treatment options for users.

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