

SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS: PREVALENCE, PATTERNS OF USE, MOTIVES, AND EFFECTS IN TREATMENT SEEKING CANNABIS USERS

Jackson M¹, Bowman J¹, Holland R⁴, Lintzeris N^{2,3}, Clancy R^{1,4}, Raimondo B⁵, Johnston J^{2,8}, Phung N^{2,6}, Childs S⁷, McGregor I², Allsop D^{2,3}, Dunlop A^{1,4}

¹ University of Newcastle, ² University of Sydney, ³ Sydney South East LHD, ⁴ Hunter New England LHD, ⁵ University of Tasmania, ⁶ Western Sydney LHD, ⁷ Central Coast LHD, ⁸ Northern NSW LHD

Introduction / Issues: Synthetic cannabinoids (SC) are a new class of emerging psychoactive substances. The laboratory-made chemical compounds mimic the effects of plant cannabis (PC) and their use is more common among cannabis users. This study explores the perceptions and experiences of treatment-seeking SC cannabis users.

Method / Approach: Participants were clients seeking treatment for cannabis use from drug and alcohol clinical services of five NSW Local Health Districts. Grouped according to SC use, participants were assessed on: drug-use history; physical and mental health; effects and motivations to use PC and SC; utilisation of health services and subjective comparisons between PC and SC.

Key Findings: Preliminary analysis (n=53) indicates a predominantly male sample (64%) reporting recent (3-month) use of alcohol (76%), tobacco (77%) and amphetamines (36%) and age of cannabis onset 13.9± 3years. Of the synthetic cannabinoid subgroup (n=38), 60% had used 20+ times, 14% reported previous month use and one-third had received SC related medical treatment. Of these, 50% were hospitalised. Exploration of motivations for use suggest that, unlike cannabis, SC are not used for coping, pleasure enhancement or illness motives. Availability and curiosity are influential factors for initial SC use, while effect strength and availability influence continued use. Their synthetic nature and negative reports regarding effects appear to be the strongest deterrents for SC uptake.

Implications and Conclusions: Despite legislative changes to curtail their prevalence, synthetic cannabinoids remain available and heavy-use occurs. As such, understanding the effects and the motivations for use of these substances continues to be relevant for clinicians and policy makers.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: There is no conflict of interests to declare.