

News Bite

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A first for Australia

Australia's first medical cannabis trial for terminally ill adults was announced at Calvary Mater Newcastle on Monday 27 July 2015 by Premier Mike Baird, along with Minister for Medical Research, Pru Goward.

Approximately 30 patients from the Hunter will be enrolled in the initial stage, with the objective being to find what cannabis dose is right for a potentially frail, underweight, end-of-life cancer population – not for pain management but primarily as a means of combating 'cachexia', that is, the wasting syndrome that stops cancer patients from wanting to eat.

The trial will be conducted at the University of Newcastle/HMRI unit based at Calvary Mater Newcastle, led by the University of New South Wales' Chief Investigator Associate Professor Meera Agar. Professor Agar will be working with Professor Jenny Martin, Chair of Clinical Pharmacology at the University of Newcastle and a practicing General Physician at Calvary Mater Newcastle; Stephen Ackland, Medical Oncology Senior Staff Specialist and Director of Hunter Cancer Research Alliance; and Professor Katherine Clark, Medical Director of Palliative Care.

Professor Martin comments, "Personally, I'm excited to think that this relatively old drug has the potential to benefit more people at the end of life than anything else I've seen in my career as a pharmacology researcher and clinician."

Patients of different age and weight ranges will be chosen and most will have a life expectancy of about three to six months. The drug will be delivered via a vaporizer, and after inhaling, participants will be shown a food chart to determine how much they feel like eating and asked about their anxiety and quality of life.

From the outset it will be assumed that cannabis will be no more effective than a placebo. If there is a positive effect, the study has been designed to see it; if it's negative, it will determine that incorrect dosage is not a factor. Therefore, the study will include a placebo to help determine whether the thought of receiving cannabis triggers a response or whether it's the actual chemical, the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) component. Our bodies produce cannabinoids naturally, which is why measuring the placebo effect is important in this study.

Ultimately, more evidence will be available before starting the next stage of the research program, which will be a state-wide trial of 300 patients.

The next step of this trial will be for the research team to seek review and approval of the trial by a Human Research Ethics Committee.

Patients will begin treatment in early 2016 with initial results expected by the end of 2016.

For more information about the trial please visit www.health.nsw.gov.au/cannabis

