

Dustin Sulak on Cannabis as a Healing Therapy

by Amber Lanier Nagle

Dustin Sulak, D.O., opened a private osteopathic manipulation, hypnotherapy and integrative medicine practice in Hallowell, Maine, in 2009, the same year the state's voters expanded its medical cannabis law. At that time, he was one of the few physicians in Maine willing to certify patients to use cannabis legally.

As of this writing, 33 states now allow medical marijuana, and 10 of them allow its recreational use. Cannabis initiatives continue to find their way onto state ballots with each election cycle.

Today, Sulak's practice serves thousands of patients that use cannabis for authorized medical purposes. He educates medical professionals and patients on its safe, clinical use, while continuing to explore its therapeutic potential. Visit Healer.com to learn more.

What led you to become a national advocate for the therapeutic potential of medicinal cannabis?

After trying cannabis in my teens, I realized what I had been told about the herb was not true, and I began thinking more critically about mainstream and natural approaches to health. Cannabis helped



me make deeper connections with people, nature, music and spirituality. In college, I worked with social and political activists to learn and spread the truth about cannabis—that it's a plant that has been used by humankind for thousands of years; that it has the potential to address many of our healthcare and environmental prob-

lems; that it's been a victim of propaganda; and that it's safe for most people.

Then, as a first-year medical student, I attended a conference lecture on the endocannabinoid system, a powerful physiological system our bodies use to stay healthy and respond to illness and injuries, and I saw the incredible therapeutic potential of cannabis in a new light.

Today, there's enormous evidence, including a 2017 report from the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, concluding that cannabis can be a safe and effective medicine for treating many conditions.

Which conditions are your patients using medical cannabis for?

My two offices in Maine currently follow approximately 8,000 patients who use medical cannabis, and of those, about 70 percent suffer from chronic pain, many

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of whom are able to eliminate or decrease their dependence on opioids.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is the next most common diagnosis we treat with cannabis, with excellent results where other medications fail. Medical cannabis is like a magnet for conditions that fail to respond to conventional medical approaches, including cancer, multiple sclerosis, dementia, Crohn's and ulcerative colitis, epilepsy, movement disorders, tick-borne disease, brain and spinal cord injuries and more.

How do you address concerns that cannabis is a gateway drug and can become addictive?

Research proves that medical cannabis actually serves as an exit drug, not a gateway drug. One study of 350 medical cannabis users in California found 40 percent of the subjects used cannabis as a substitute for alcohol, 26 percent as a substitute for illicit drugs, and 66 percent as a substitute for prescription drugs. Any time a person can replace a harmful substance with a safer substance like cannabis, it's a step in the right direction.

Cannabis dependence does exist, but is uncommon. One study published in the journal *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology* found that only 9 percent of those who try cannabis illicitly develop dependence, compared to 24 percent of those who try heroin. Cannabis withdrawal is mild and similar in intensity to caffeine withdrawal, and most people don't have any trouble stopping using cannabis, when and if they need to.

Are there any side effects?

The common adverse effects of cannabis are mild, especially when compared to other drugs. A 2008 review found that in 23 randomized controlled trials, there was no higher incidence of serious adverse events following medical cannabis use compared with control. Dizziness was the most common non-serious adverse effect. Other common adverse effects include euphoria, altered consciousness, acute panic or paranoid reaction; altered motivation; impaired attention, memory and psychomotor performance; tachycardia; orthostatic hypotension; dry mouth; and increased appetite.

If someone lives in a state that has legalized medicinal cannabis and thinks it may help a disease or condition, what should be their first step?

The ideal first step is to find a medical provider with experience in the medical cannabis field. The Society of Cannabis Clinicians (CannabisClinicians.org) is a good resource.

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