

Prescription for A Joint

By Dan Even, Maariv, HaMagazin, January 2009

- While Police persecute dealers, the number of Medical Marijuana permissions is rocketing sky high.
- More and more patients with chronic diseases, mental disorders and even shell shock get a prescription for joints from their doctors.
- HaMagazin research reveals a massive increase in Medical Marijuana patients in Israel, including patients who suffer from mental problems or traumas.
- Many of these patients describe the amazing improvement that has occurred in their lives since they smoked their first joint.
- And yet, in order to obtain their medicine they still need to go through a long obstacle course.

Seven years ago “A”. was about to do a major change in her life, and move from the Center of Israel to Rosh Pina, in Northern Israel, right before the move she was involved in a car accident that changed her life completely. A was severely injured. She had fractures, vision disorders and strong pains. She was in medical treatment for month, but her regular nightmares continued, and her mental distress kept growing. “My life stopped,” she says. “I cancelled my plans to move up North, I couldn’t work, I couldn’t do anything. I sought a psychiatrist because I suffered depression and pains, and used to wake up at night. I got pills that were completely useless. Then my diseases escalated, and I developed heart and lungs conditions.”

Four years ago her health deteriorated to the point she was hospitalized, unconscious, in Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv, and had to be respirated artificially for ten days. When she recovered, she decided to seek for non-conventional medical solutions. “I tried all kinds of alternative methods: acupuncture, reflexology, energy healing,” she says, “every day I tried something different.” However, the great improvement in her situation occurred surprisingly a year ago, when she was granted the permission to use Medical Marijuana.

Take A Deep Breath

Today, at age 61, A. attributes the great change in her life to the Medical Marijuana she has been smoking every day. She received the permission for the medicine from a psychiatrist as a “Compassionate Treatment”, after she was diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) patient, following her traumatic car accident. Surprisingly as it might sound, scientific evidence that shows a possible positive effect on mental disorders helped her getting the permission from the Ministry of Health. “The doctors said that my health improvement was strange,” she tells us, “my lungs doctor noticed that my lungs were functioning better, which didn’t make sense to him at all – I was smoking marijuana, after all. My cardiologist said I was getting younger. I also reduced my heart medication dosage, because I was more relaxed, and my blood pressure is more balanced now. I’m involved in spirituality and, and my mental and emotional well being is much better. Cannabis helps me get in touch with my feelings. Our body knows how to heal itself, if we give it the right conditions.”

What about the altered consciousness that is caused by smoking marijuana?

“Sometimes I get a little high, but with time, I achieved better knowledge of the medicine. It’s a medicine that is taken according to one’s own feeling.

Sometimes, when I have excruciating pains, I can smoke a lot of joints during one day. When there aren’t any pains, I smoke only half a joint a day. It is not addictive, but rather a treatment I use according to my needs.

Something has happened recently to the Medical Marijuana enterprise in Israel. While the Police are persecuting suspects in selling marijuana in the black market, a growing legal network is distributing Medical Marijuana for patients – for free.

The first permissions for medical marijuana were given ten years ago to terminal patients of cancer or AIDS who sought to ease their pains at during their last days. However, in the last months, in accordance to new studies about Marijuana’s medical abilities, Israel has expanded the list of conditions that allow that unique treatment. Today, the treatment is given to chronically ill patients, and even to PTSD patients. The number of Medical Marijuana permissions given by the Ministry of Health has rocketed in the last months, according to Dr. Yehuda Baruch, director of Abarbanel Mental Hospital, who is also in charge of granting the permissions. There are still less than 1,000 patients, but today, in Israel, 300 patients get Medical Marijuana. Two years ago there were only 20, and that means a rise of 1400% in new permissions. Since the Ministry of Health had first started granting Medical Marijuana permissions, ten years ago, to this day, 500 patients have received them.

A large amount of chronically ill patients had been granted the permission lately. In a newly published procedure, Dr. Baruch allows for a “fast lane” permissions for three chronic diseases: chronic neural pains (neuropathic pain), Krohn Disease (a chronic inflammation of the digestive system) and MS patients, if the disease is stable.

In addition to the above, cancer patients who seek to reduce the nausea and vomiting, all side effects of chemotherapy, have been granted permissions for years. Furthermore, during this time an asthma patient received a special permission, who used the medicine to clear her bronchi. Israel, it is interesting to note, is one of few countries in the world to grant government permissions for Medical Marijuana, including Holland, Canada and 13 states in the US. Recently, it was decided that to grant permissions for Medical Marijuana treatments for mental problems as well. In the meantime, only 26 PTSD patients receive the medicine as a “compassionate treatment”. A study about Medical Marijuana treatment for PTSD patients had been planned at Abarbanel Hospital, but had not been approved by the Helsinki committee for Human Experiments, due to lack of former scientific evidence. One of the PTSD patients, who received Medical Marijuana, already stopped the treatment, after developing side effects. Maariv was informed that PTSD patients, who were traumatized in Israel wars, including the 1973 War, are treated with Medical Marijuana. “I track down the patients’ progress, and I am not sure we would continue the treatment,” tells us Dr. Baruch. The medical literature does not have plenty of information to establish the effectiveness of the Medical Marijuana treatment in the most

common mental disorders, such as clinical depression. However, the number of advocates for such studies is increasing, particularly of a study that will look into the possible relation between the Marijuana receptors in the brain - to depression.

A relation of that sort made it to the headlines recently, referring to the depressive effects of the weight loss drug, "Acomplia", that affects the same brain receptors activated by the Marijuana. Yet, an experiment planned in Abarbanel and Wolfson hospitals to study the affect of Medical Marijuana on Alzheimer's patients failed to provide any answer, since it was not approved, for the very same reasons: Lack of former scientific evidence.

Grow Your Own

Ironically, the first one to bring the Medical Marijuana notion to Israel, was Boaz Wachtel, who founded Ale Yarok Party in 1999. As early as 1995, Wachtel had submitted an application to the Ministry of Health for Medical Marijuana treatment for an AIDS patient, Dr. Gideon Hirsch RIP, who later became the Israel AIDS Task Force, and was found dead in his Tel Aviv house two weeks ago. Dr. Hirsch did not receive the desired permission, but the application started a discussion and lead eventually to the regularization of Medical Marijuana permissions by the Ministry of Health. "It is a blessed increase [in permission given to patients], but it's only a fraction of the total number of people using Medical Marijuana in Israel, for medical reasons," estimates Wachtel. "Some are afraid of the bureaucratic hassle, or maybe it's because it's so hard to obtain the medicine legally. This way or another, many people use it illegally, and some are

harassed by the Police. Despite all that, I praise Dr. Baruch for opening the bureaucratic bottle neck. Today an automatic approval is given to patients of many diseases, and that shows how progressive is Israel in this field.”

A. is happy too about the increase of the permissions. “I’m thrilled about what’s going in Israel right now, there is a great compassion for patients here. Israel is a very small place, and anyone might have relatives who would possibly need Medical Marijuana sometime. The fact that this treatment is validated by the state makes me very happy.”

Applications for Medical Marijuana can be submitted to Dr. Baruch only by a specialist, and only when there is scientific evidence for the effectiveness of treatment for the patient’s condition.

Dr. Itay Gur-Arie, Pain Release Unit director in Sheba Medical Center and the head of Israel Pain Association is one of the most prolific application submitters. “The fact that the option to prescribe Medical Marijuana for neuropathic pain patients exists, doesn’t mean that every person who suffers such pains is prescribed Medical Marijuana,” stresses Dr. Gur-Arie. Ten thousands of Israelis suffer from neural pain and might receive now prescriptions for Medical Marijuana, however, he states, “the treatment schedule will be according to the patient’s doctor, since there are still some concerns about Medical Marijuana. We have to remember that smoking is involved, and that there is a difficulty obtaining the medicine. Therefore, as medication, Marijuana isn’t the first priority. Studies show that its effectiveness compare to other treatments for neural pain are only good for secondary or even third line of

treatment. My assessment, based on scientific facts, is that we shouldn't offer it as the first line of treatment for neural pains, and with its problematic status, we have to be extra cautious."

Dr. Gur-Arie encountered, more than once, patients of neural pain who sought a Medical Marijuana permission to release themselves of a Police investigation, after they were caught and suspected of drug possession. "In my clinical work I use my judgment. Sometimes I even tend to be strict," he says, "I don't want that a few cases of irresponsible use of Medical Marijuana will harm the rest of the patients. After all, I'm trying to promote the medicine as a doctor, not as a political goal," he adds.

Wachtel claims, nonetheless, that more doctors should be able to apply for permission for their patients. "It shouldn't be limited to ward directors and specialists," he says, "family physicians should be able to apply for permission too."

The next step for the Ministry of Health, after the growth in the number of permissions, would be dealing with Medical Marijuana growing methods in Israel, an issue that has become the bone of contention between the different Israeli authorities. Patients who acquired Medical Marijuana permission can now grow the plant on their own, under strict conditions: No more than ten pots per patient. The plant can only reach 1.5 m. (3.2 feet) height or less, and can be grown only in a certain address, reported to the Ministry of Health. Every growing patient is entitled to possess up to 200 grams of active or dry medicine, at any time, at the very same reported address.

Getting It

Instead of growing it by themselves, patients can ask for free provision of the medicine, which is gratis, according to the Police regulations. The four growers are not allowed to charge money for it. The permit for growing Medical Marijuana was given to them by the Ministry of Health following a strict Police inspection, to make sure there is no drug dealing suspicion involved. Patients, who are interested in acquiring the medicine from one of the growers, need to find their way directly to the grower. If they are paralyzed, a family member can pick up the medicine for them. As for the growers, they do it “for the patients,” with no profit at all. According to our reports, the cost of growing and producing 100 grams of Medical Marijuana can sum up at 2,000-2,500 NIS a month (\$500-650 app.). This very high cost is not subsidized by the HMOs, and is not defined as medication, since the producer does not follow the GMP standards. One of these four growers lives on donations, and recently received a donation from MAPS, an organization that supports the study of the medical qualities of Marijuana and Ecstasy.

Industry insiders told us that the growers’ interest in continuing growing is mainly the experience they can acquire towards entering the Marijuana export market, where they can make good profits. Others are more skeptical about the odds of Israel handing permissions for exporting Marijuana for medical needs. By the way, Holland is the only country to allow Medical Marijuana export, but the State of Israel never permitted Marijuana import from Holland, despite the attempts made by the Ministry of Health, and the approval of the Police, that

prefers importing the medicine to growing it in Israel. Medical Marijuana permissions might be abused, but since they are given to patients, the government assumes that the medicine provided to a patient will not be used for drug dealing.

In November 2007 a 22 year old man from Netanya was arrested after a Marijuana growing lab was found in his home. However, after it turned out the suspect's father is a cancer patient who obtained a drug grower's permission, the judge decided to mitigate his sentence to a house arrest. The court decision stated that even a person who has been arrested in the past for possessing Marijuana, may obtain permission for Medical Marijuana treatment, of medical reasons, later on in his life. Thus, for instance, in November, the Ministry of Health permitted an Eilat resident who was severely injured in a car accident in 2000 to grow and use Marijuana for medical reasons, when he proved that he suffered chronic pain, despite the fact that he was arrested a year ago with 100 grams of Marijuana. Maariv was informed that lately the Israeli Police had requested from the Ministry of Health a list of all the patients who chose to grow Medical Marijuana in pots at home, under the Police restrictions. This way the Police can supervise them, the same way they supervise the four growers. "I hope that the patients don't supply their friends with "gifts" of medicine, but I can't follow each and every one of them," says Dr. Baruch. "As for the growers too, I can't check if they have grown it by themselves or bought it in the black market. I trust the patients who are in need for this kind of treatment."

The current situation demands creative solutions, soon to be scrutinized by the Ministry of Health. “The model Israel uses for providing Medical Marijuana is not economically sustainable, because it makes the growers seek donations and finance Marijuana out of their own pocket,” says Wachtel. “The HMOs should acknowledge it and pay for the cost, include the treatment in the “Medication Basket” [a list of medications and medical services paid by HMOs and the State of Israel), or to allow the growers to charge money for it. The distribution at the growers houses is problematic too, and distribution contracts with pharmacies are needed to allow proper geographic dispersion all over the country. Another option is an agreement with the Postal Service for sending Medical Marijuana securely to patients.”