

# Improving Quality of Life for AIDS Patients

*Clinical practice guidelines make for better treatments, but developing them isn't easy. **Andrea Kovarcsik** reports on how a Canopy Growth Corporation donation is helping the Canadian AIDS Society develop cannabis treatment guidelines for Canadian patients.*

Sick. Unwell. Nauseated. In pain. These are the words Shari Margolese uses to describe her condition prior to starting medical cannabis therapy 20 years ago. Margolese has suffered from chronic arthritis since she was a teenager, and, in 1993, was diagnosed with HIV. She'd always been sensitive to traditional pharmaceuticals, and her HIV medication was no different, causing side effects such as nausea and appetite loss. Today, Margolese credits the herb with her improved quality of life.

But the journey to accessing medical cannabis was not an easy one. When Margolese first approached her family doctor about using it to manage the side effects of her HIV medication, her doctor refused. "She just wasn't interested," says Margolese. "She didn't think it would help and there wasn't enough research." So Margolese visited her infectious disease specialist, who was also wary. Three years and countless standard medications later, Margolese's specialist finally gave in. "She said as long as I didn't sell it, she was okay with it. And she's been signing my medical papers for the last 20 years."

Today, individuals living with HIV still face barriers to accessing medical cannabis. Margolese jumped one main hurdle, medical

support, but still struggles with another, affordability. Medical cannabis has largely replaced her need for painkillers, anti-anxiety medication, antidepressants and appetite stimulants, but affording the three grams she needs daily is a challenge. At \$8 a gram, her monthly total would be \$720.

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**- Hilary Black**

These barriers are among the issues that Canopy Growth Corporation and the Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) hope to address with a research program announced this summer. A public cannabis company based in Smiths Falls, Ont., Canopy Growth has pledged \$200,000 over two years to CAS for the development of clinical practice guidelines. The guidelines will address how best to incorporate cannabis in symptom management, focusing on optimal wellness for people living with chronic pain related to HIV and other diseases.

No such guidelines exist yet, meaning the research program's task force is embarking on an unprecedented project.

"Developing clinical practice guidelines is daunting," says Hilary Black, director of patient advocacy at Canopy Growth, "which is why they don't exist. But physicians and other health care professionals really need them to understand how to use cannabis in their practices."





CANADIAN AIDS SOCIETY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR GARY LACASSE WITH CANOPY GROWTH CORPORATION PRESIDENT MARK ZEKULIN.

Medical cannabis is markedly less one-size-fits-all than typical pharmaceuticals. We each metabolize cannabinoids at different rates, and experience different reactions depending on the strain and mode of ingestion. This calls for an intimate patient-doctor conversation regarding symptoms, strains, potency, dosage and quality of life, which is not yet happening in the Canadian mainstream.

“It’s a contentious issue,” says Dr. Lynne Belle-Isle, national programs manager at CAS and task force chair. “In a prohibition environment, much stigma has been attributed to cannabis use. Physicians tend not to ask about it, and patients are reluctant to bring it up.”

The first step in developing the guidelines will be a systematic review of the current literature and state of knowledge regarding the use of cannabis in the management of HIV and other chronic diseases. Based on the evidence of the review, the task force will then draft its guidelines. The final report will be published in a medical journal and disseminated via conferences, meetings, and, hopefully, webinars and workshops.

For their part, Canopy Growth is as excited about the program as CAS. “Every day we hear about the challenges people face and the results they’re having,” says Mark Zekulin, president of Canopy Growth, regarding medical cannabis use. “When someone says, ‘This has changed my life. I now have a quality of life I didn’t have before,’ that’s a big deal!” In terms of funding research, he says, there’s no better partner than CAS. “Well

before we were involved, CAS was one of the early advocates for medical cannabis. We’ve always admired what they’ve done, and at this moment the time seemed right.”

Though the task force’s road ahead is a long and painstaking one, the future is promising. With recreational legalization around the corner in Canada, hopefully the conversation will become more comfortable and normal, allowing more people living with HIV to access this medicine.

“Marijuana has been a multi-use medicine for me that has really improved my quality of life,” says Margolese. “That’s why we need these guidelines.”

**This year’s Top Charitable Initiative award honours Canopy Growth for its \$200,000 commitment to the Canadian AIDS Society.**