

MEDICAL MARIJUANA

BY VESNA PLAZACIC



The late *Toronto Star* journalist Barbara Turnbull used to smoke marijuana daily to control the muscle spasms she regularly experienced after she was shot in the neck during an armed robbery at a Mississauga convenience store in 1983. She was only 18 at the time, but lived another 32 years.

Turnbull often wrote candidly about her marijuana use. In a 2013 *Star Dispatches* eBook, she said: "I swear by pot, though I'm careful about using it. I need only one 'hit' from my pipe for hours of relief, but that's enough to make me spacey for a good half-hour or more...I use it sparingly and, despite having been a regular user for many years, I don't need increasing amounts for the same effect."

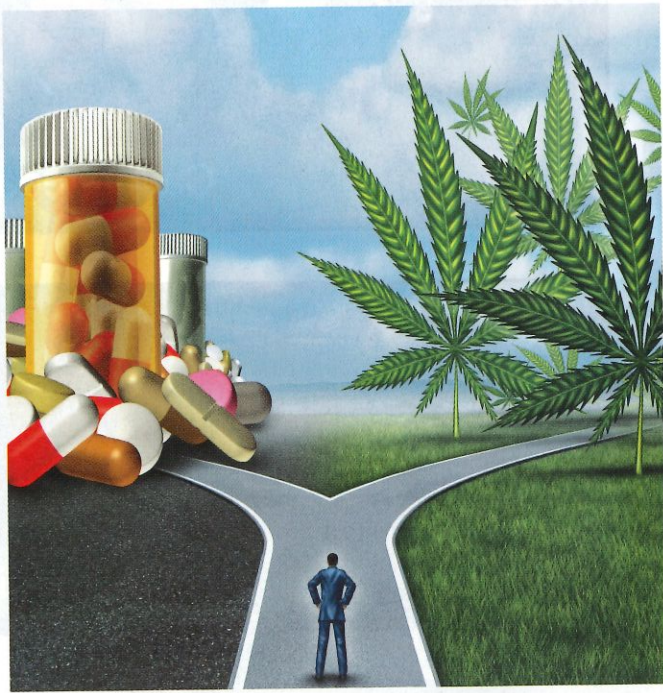
Like many others, Turnbull once relied on prescription drugs to alleviate her symptoms, but the medicine, no matter how strong the dose, often lost its effect. The spasms she suffered were violent and often



threw her from her wheelchair. She discovered that marijuana helped calm her while giving her greater independence and safety, and was a strong advocate for the legalization of the drug.

Ordinary lives

Today, there are many examples of people using marijuana to find relief. There's Sarah Wilkinson, an Alberta mom who, in 2013, extracted the cannabis oil from doctor-prescribed marijuana for her eight-year old daughter, Mia, who suffered life-threatening seizures as a result of Ohtahara syndrome. Last summer, Wilkinson was forced to travel to Ontario after she was denied a renewed prescription from Alberta Health Services, which does not support the use of medical marijuana for children with epilepsy. In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Wilkinson said prior to taking the daily doses of oral cannabis oil, Mia suffered up to 100 seizures a day, despite taking 30–40 anticonvulsive pills daily. Cannabis oil is the only therapy that has worked to stop her daughter's seizures.



Ronald Francis, the New Brunswick RCMP officer who battled post-traumatic stress disorder and made headlines for smoking medical marijuana on the job, is another example. Francis was unfairly disciplined and stigmatized, and later took his own life. Stories like Francis's are helping to change the conversation about mental health and marijuana use, but it will still take time for many to get on board.

Navigating the health care system

While it seems that Health Canada is now releasing new information about the use and legalities around marijuana more frequently, those who need the drug for medicinal purposes are still frustrated. They point to ongoing difficulties in navigating the health care system in order to get their prescriptions filled.

Russell Smith has a history of asking for and being denied a prescription for medical marijuana. Smith, a Toronto author/journalist, lives with a genetic disability called syndactyly, which he shares with his father and his young son. Syndactyly is a condition in which two or more of the digits are fused together. But that's not why Smith has sought out medical marijuana. On top of living with complete complex syndactyly, which is the most severe form of the condition, Smith also suffers from an autoimmune disorder that causes inflammation of the nerves, which he says is extremely painful.

"No conventional painkillers can treat it," he says, "because nerve pain works in a completely different way. It's connected directly to your brain and very difficult to block." Smith was desperate, and says various friends recommended medical marijuana. However, neither his neurologist nor his

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family doctor would prescribe it. Time and again, both cited concerns about the lack of scientific evidence around effectiveness and treatment protocols. Of note: Canadian physicians have the right to refuse to prescribe marijuana, but many are on board. In 2014, Health Canada estimated that some 38,000 patients were registered users of medical marijuana.

What Smith was after was a special strain of medical marijuana that is supposedly better for pain. It has a higher proportion than normal of a certain pain-relieving chemical and a lower proportion of THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the chemical with psychoactive effects.

"I'm not terribly excited about smoking marijuana to get high," says the young father. "I have to be sober all the time. I'm responsible. I work. But I am excited by the prospect of a new strain that might possibly relieve my pain. I'm just dreaming about it, but I won't ever know if it's effective until I'm allowed to try it." With new legislation promising legal marijuana for recreational use not slated until spring of 2017, Smith will have to hang on a little longer.

James Brandt, a young man in his early 40s, has lived with multiple sclerosis (MS) for the past decade. Brandt is usually a ball of energy. His hands flail when he talks, he shifts in his seat and he's always on the move. But he's been losing his vision and his sense of balance for a while now, and complains of being tired most of the time. He can no longer work and, for a high-energy person, it's distressing. "I get tired around 11:30 in the morning," he says. "I feel like it should be nap time, but it's too early. It makes me crazy." It's specifically to calm these feelings of anger that he takes cannabidiol in pill form. He says it calms him down, especially in the mornings.

The strain Brandt uses reduces the euphoric high caused by THC, but is more effective for Brandt than traditional MS medications. "I feel like it's opened up my chest," he says. "My energy levels are up; the MS drains my energy."





Jon Liedtke

Advocating for medical marijuana users

Jon Liedtke is a journalist, medical marijuana user, political activist and, most recently, co-owner of Higher Grounds, a marijuana vapor lounge in Windsor. He and his fellow citizens want to reduce the stigma that still exists around medical marijuana



use by creating inclusive environments where people can talk freely about their experiences and consume the drug in a safe place. Liedtke's gastrointestinal disorder led him to medical marijuana to manage his pain and stimulate his appetite, but he was very secretive about

his use, fearing the stigma he would face—especially as a journalist.

"Watching legalization come about and then moving into opening up this business, I became far more comfortable talking about these issues, especially now in the light of everything that's happening with the province."

With the province trying to prohibit vaping along with the looming ban on e-cigarettes, Liedtke feels the need to speak up about the law's impact on medical marijuana users and advocate for those who will be affected. "Having a barrier to medication isn't acceptable, especially if it's a monetary one," he says. "The laws need to be worked out well and very quickly for this to be a smooth transition. After all, we live in Canada; we have a health care system and we need to ensure that anyone who needs access to medication can get that access. Unfortunately, right now that's not the case." ■

Vesna Plazacic is a freelance writer, living in Toronto, Ontario. She writes about international affairs, local arts, culture and social and political issues.

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