

HARM REDUCTION EDUCATION & PRODUCT SAFETY

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In this third section of this four-part series, the discussion will focus on the principles of Harm Reduction Education (HRE), ideas for implementing clinic policies and training and emerging trends in cannabis that are relevant to patient safety.

Participants will learn to interpret certificates of analysis (COAs) on cannabis products in order to evaluate a product for safety, clinical interactions, and therapeutic potential.

Harm Reduction Education (HRE)

In the murky atmosphere surrounding cannabis use in the veterinary industry, it is essential that the veterinary community define a clear set of parameters for answering cannabis questions. Cannabis products are easily accessible and over-eager marketing is steering our clients toward over- or casual-use.

There is a clear set of risks associated with cannabis administration to an animal without veterinary oversight. The veterinary team should be involved with a pet owner's decision to administer cannabis to their animal in order to guard against pharmaceutical interaction, maintain a complete medical history on every patient, as well as strengthen the Veterinary-Client-Patient-Relationship (VCPR).

It is incumbent on medical practitioners to balance scientifically-researched modalities with empathetic care and ensure that good harm reduction measures are implemented at all client touchpoints. The questions that still surround the medical use of cannabis does not prohibit or negate the need for practitioners to continue to implement basic principles of good medical care around any decisions our clients make in the care of their pets.

Harm Reduction Education (HRE) implements basic education for both pet owners and members of the health care team to protect patients from contaminated products, accidental intoxications, inappropriate use in certain medical conditions, and dangerous interactions with other medical comorbidities. Cannabis medicine is offering unique and impressively positive clinical results. However, medical practitioners and scientists must be careful to not allow a positivity bias to obscure the importance of harm prevention and research-backed evidence.

Clinic-wide HRE plans & training

Team leaders and training managers must begin implementing clinic-wide, cannabis-specific training to ensure that clients are receiving consistent and accurate information from all members of the clinic team.

Open discussions about clinic cannabis policies ensure that all team members have the opportunity to express their personal views, understand the clinic and/or corporate-level policies around cannabis, and ensure that the team is able to appropriately field questions from pet owners and provide scientifically accurate answers when appropriate.

Importance of nursing care

Veterinary health care teams should emphasize the importance of monitoring to assess both positive and negative trends in animals that are receiving a cannabis product. Practitioners should instruct pet owners to keep a journal of their animal's response to cannabis administration. The patient journals not only provide valuable clinical information, but also empower the pet owner by involving them in their animal's care.

Conditions such as seizures, severe pain, and palliative care already require complex nursing care and the use of cannabis in these conditions is no different. The successful implementation of cannabis therapy in these cases requires that the pet owners reliable access to medical resources to answer product questions, access administration assistance, and improve the husbandry care for these animals. Clinic teams should work to maximize the involvement of every team member in providing scope of practice-appropriate

medical counseling, client & patient follow up, monitoring of patient response, and maintaining up-to-date patient histories.

Principles of product review

A product safety evaluation should include assessment of the company's manufacturing techniques and production methods. The product should be evaluated for animal-appropriate formulation, and close examination of that product's Certificate of Analysis (COA).

A COA provides the practitioner with the molecular profile of the cannabis product as well as evidence of freedom from contaminants (pesticides, heavy metals, mold, bacteria, residual solvents). A thorough review of a product's COA allows the practitioner to evaluate the product for safety, potential efficacy in specific conditions, and appropriate pricing.

Any cannabis product administered to an animal should be evaluated for pet-safe formulations. Human cannabis products can frequently contain extra additives, coloring or sweeteners as well as known toxins such as xylitol, chocolate, raisins, etc. The contamination testing limits that are appropriate for human patients may be dramatically different from those that are safe for animals.

While inhalation and topical product formulations are not yet easily utilized in veterinary medicine, applications for these formulations may not be far off. However, in the interim, orally administered cannabis is the most common formulation available in veterinary medicine. Even within this single category, options abound. Oral cannabis products are available in tinctures (liquid), pills, capsules, treats and powdered products. Each of these formulations has pros and cons for the condition being treated, ease of administration by the pet owner, and individual animal preferences. Veterinary practitioners should also evaluate the product for cautious use in food allergies cases and the presence of contaminants.

It is imperative that cannabis products used for a medicinal purpose are rigorously tested to demonstrate freedom from accumulated pesticides, heavy metals and others. If any company does not readily provide COA's, it is not advised to use their product.

Molecular profiles & assessing efficacy

One of the most disorienting characteristics of cannabis medicine for today's medical professionals may be that cannabis products allow for (and often require) a very individualized dosing plan. The influence of the endocannabinoid system throughout the body and across multiple systems makes it difficult to translate traditional research methods and dosing guidelines to cannabis administration. Additionally, cannabis products that have a complex spectrum (multiple molecules) have an even wider set of effects and complex interactions (synergy) than single-molecule products.

Cannabis dosing guidelines must incorporate an understanding of the product's molecular profile, the influence of the individual molecules on multiple body systems, the synergistic effects of and between these molecules, and the individualized response of each patient. Although specific weight-based guidelines are becoming available, the adage of "start low, go slow" is still the most relevant recommendation for starting a cannabis regimen in any patient regardless of species, condition, or patient temperament.

CBD and THC are only two of the many molecules produced by the cannabis plant. These two molecules frequently make up the largest portion by volume or weight of any cannabis product. Products that contain higher concentrations of CBD are most effective for immune system imbalances, anxiety disorders, mild pain control, and a subset of seizure conditions.

Products that contain a more balanced ratio of CBD to THC provide stronger pain control, stronger anti-inflammatory effects, improved nervous system regulation, and greater success in a subset of behavior disorders.

References

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