

## **B.C. researchers find that cannabis could help reduce crack cocaine use**

*Research presented by BC Centre on Substance Use scientists at Harm Reduction International Conference in Montreal offers possible treatment for harmful crack cocaine use*

**Vancouver, B.C. (May 16, 2017)** – Using cannabis might be an effective strategy for people seeking to control their use of crack cocaine, according to new research from scientists at the BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU).

Scientists examined the crack use histories of 122 people who use drugs in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and Downtown South neighbourhoods and observed reductions in the frequency of crack use following periods in which they reported using cannabis to control their crack use. The research was presented today at the 2017 Harm Reduction International (HRI) Conference in Montreal.

“Crack cocaine, whether it’s injected or inhaled, is associated with an array of negative health consequences, including cuts and burns from unsafe pipes and the transmission of infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C,” said Dr. Eugenia Socias, a physician and postdoctoral fellow at BCCSU and first author of the study who presented the research at the HRI Conference. “We found that intentional cannabis use preceded declines in crack use among crack cocaine users who pursued self-medication with cannabis.”

According to recent estimates, there are between 14 and 21 million current users of cocaine worldwide, of whom approximately seven million have a cocaine use disorder. A substantial proportion of cocaine use is thought to occur in the form of crack cocaine, particularly among marginalized populations in urban settings in North and South America. Risks associated with crack cocaine include accidental overdose and transmission of infectious diseases, such as hepatitis and HIV. There exist no effective pharmaceutical therapies for crack cocaine use.

The BCCSU’s research is the largest longitudinal study to demonstrate the potential role of cannabis use as a reduction or substitution strategy for crack cocaine use. The findings are in line with smaller case and qualitative studies in Jamaica and Brazil. For instance, a study conducted in Brazil – which has struggled with a crack cocaine epidemic and is the largest consumer of crack cocaine in the world – followed 25 treatment-seeking individuals with crack use disorders who reported using cannabis to reduce cocaine-related craving symptoms. Over a nine-month follow-up period, the majority (68%) stopped using crack.

“Problematic crack cocaine use causes immense human suffering globally,” said Dr. M-J Milloy, a research scientist at the BCCSU and senior author of the paper. “In the absence of effective therapies for crack dependence, our findings provide a foundation on which to explore the potential of cannabis to treat problematic substance use. The federal government’s plans to legalize cannabis represents a tremendous opportunity to support research in this area and we plan to further investigate whether cannabis could contribute to reducing the harms of crack cocaine use among marginalized drug users.”

This study was supported by funding from the United States National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). NG Biomed Ltd., a Vancouver firm seeking a licence to produce medical cannabis in Canada, gave a \$1-million gift to the University of British Columbia to support Dr. Milloy and his research into the possible medical applications of cannabis.

**About the BC Centre on Substance Use**

The BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) is a provincially networked organization with a mandate to develop, help implement, and evaluate evidence-based approaches to substance use. Located at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver and co-located within the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, the BCCSU has researchers based at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. The BCCSU aims to build upon the success of its partner organization, the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, by improving the integration of best practices and care across the continuum of responses to substance use through the collaborative development of policies, guidelines, and standards. With the support of the province of BC, BCCSU aims to transform substance use policies, programs, and services by translating research into education and care guidance, thereby serving and improving the health of all British Columbians.

**About the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS**

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS is Canada's largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility and is internationally recognized as an innovative world leader in combating HIV/AIDS and related diseases. BC-CfE is based at St. Paul's Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE works in close collaboration with key provincial stakeholders, including government, health authorities, health care providers, academics from other institutions, and the community to decrease the health burden of HIV and AIDS. By developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related illnesses, the BC-CfE helps improve the health of British Columbians.

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