



Media guidelines for reporting on medical cannabis

By Cannabis Health in association with PLEA
(Patient-Led Engagement for Access)

The media can have huge influence in changing attitudes and destigmatising medical cannabis.

We are calling for journalists, editors and members of the media to report responsibly on this topic. We encourage them to think about the language they use, to approach stories about medical cannabis as they would any other form of healthcare and to avoid discriminating against patients.

Foreword

Two years ago, on 1 November 2018, medical cannabis was legalised in the UK, but after decades of being demonised in society, there is a long way to go before public attitudes catch up.

Cannabis is still widely associated with criminality, and is yet to shake its connotations of 'spliffs' smoked by 'stoners' and 'hippies'.

Despite studies showing it to be lower risk than the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, the focus from the media has remained largely fixed on the 'harmful' effects of cannabis, with a recent report from Open Cannabis showing a huge gap in awareness among the British public. There are many factors at play here.

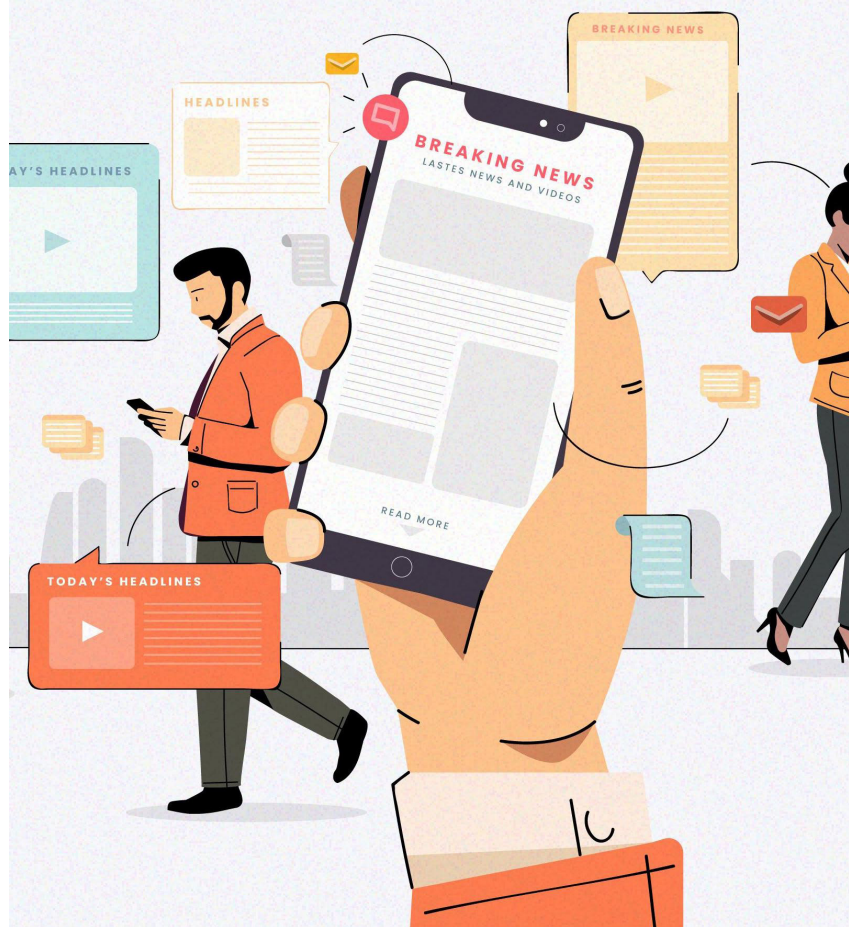
With only a handful of prescriptions issued on the NHS since the law change, 1.4 million patients in the UK, unable to afford the private fees, are currently forced to access cannabis illicitly. They are branded as criminals and drug-seeking and live not only with that stigma, but the fear of prosecution for using a medicine that could be life-changing for them.

Even those who are able to access medical cannabis legally face stigmatisation. The majority of patients prescribed medical cannabis live with chronic pain, neurological or psychiatric conditions, such as fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, anxiety and PTSD, yet many continue to face stigma in their day-to-day lives - in the workplace, in their local community, among friends and family and often from healthcare professionals.

The media not only reflects public attitudes but also plays a huge part in shaping them. It's not difficult to understand why some of the common misconceptions about consuming cannabis are so hard to shift, when terms such as 'stoner' and 'pothead' are regularly splashed across the pages of the press.

Lucy Stafford, advocacy lead at PLEA (Patient-Led Engagement for Access) commented: "Accurate and understanding reporting of patient experiences is key to destigmatising medical cannabis.

"I hope these guidelines lead to improved public understanding of medical cannabis and the patients who desperately need access to these medications."



Reporting tips

- Avoid sensationalising someone's experience for the sake of a good headline and be particularly aware of stigmatising language in headers and standfirsts
- Approach patients as part of your research, not just as case studies. They are the experts when it comes to medical cannabis.
- Clarify costs of medication and avoid misleading references to previous high cost prescriptions where it is no longer appropriate. Inaccurate reporting of how patients access medication leads to patients not knowing what options are out there.
- Include the voices of patients in your story - think 'nothing about them, without them'.

Language

- Terms such as 'stoner', 'pothead' and 'junkie' should have no place in a story about medical cannabis. Would you refer to someone who uses morphine for pain relief as a 'junkie'?

- Similarly, using language such as ‘weed’, ‘pot’, ‘spliff’ or ‘joint’ carries connotations of drug use.
- The term ‘majuarana’ should be avoided, due to its deep roots in race and politics. Harry Anslinger, the US bureaucrat who led the prohibition effort is said to have used the word to emphasise the drug’s foreignness, saying most consumers were ‘Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos and entertainers’. It is inappropriate for use today, when cannabis arrests continue to disproportionately affect minorities.
- Think about the use of the term ‘cannabis user’ - would we call someone a paracetamol user? Try ‘cannabis patient’ or ‘consuming cannabis’ instead.
- Avoid references to getting high or intoxication - cannabis is a medication that enables patients to live their daily lives. Their dosage is monitored by a prescribing doctor for minimal side effects.
- Puns that imply intoxication - particularly in headlines - are misleading.
- Terms such as ‘suffers from’ can also be stigmatising for people living with chronic health conditions. Many people lead full and happy lives, so use ‘lives with fibromyalgia’ or ‘has epilepsy’ instead.
- Using language such as ‘they’ ‘them’ or ‘those with...’ can be othering. Try to use people’s names and as much as possible include their own words when sharing their experiences.
- Avoid the term ‘wheelchair-bound’ and instead refer to using mobility aids.

Images

Images can be just as damaging as words, if not more. Avoid using stigmatising images in stories about medical cannabis. A stock photo of someone smoking cannabis is just as harmful as using the term ‘stoner’ or ‘pothead’ Try to use images of the people in the story wherever possible.

Resources

There are a number of websites and platforms which have been set up with the purpose of increasing awareness, understanding and educating health professionals, patients and the general public about medical cannabis.

MEDCAN

A platform for patients and parents which provides free resources and educational material on cannabis and the endocannabinoid system.

Open Cannabis

A campaign which shares up-to-date information about the UK system, and resources from other medical cannabis organisations. <https://www.opencannabis.uk/>

PLEA (Patient-Led Engagement for Access)

The PLEA Community collaborates with patients, clinicians and researchers to share knowledge and advocate for wider access to medical cannabis <https://www.pleacommunity.org.uk/>

Cannabis Patient Advocacy and Support Services

A cross-sector initiative providing education, advocacy and support for patients and healthcare professionals <https://cannpass.org/>

Drug Science

The UK’s independent scientific body on drugs and leaders of Project Twenty21 <https://drugscience.org.uk/>

The Primary Care Cannabis Network

Offers information and education for GPs interested in medical cannabis. <https://www.primarycarecannabisnetwork.com/>

Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society

An independent community of medical cannabis prescribers, dedicated to bringing the medicine to those with chronic conditions <https://www.ukmccs.org/>

Maple Tree Consultants

Medical cannabis consultancy firm providing expertise for businesses in the sector <https://www.mapletreeconsultants.co.uk/>

Media contacts

Medical cannabis campaigners, Hannah Deacon (whose son Alfie Dingley received the first prescription on the NHS) and Professor Mike Barnes are available for expert comment. Contact:

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