

National Healthcare

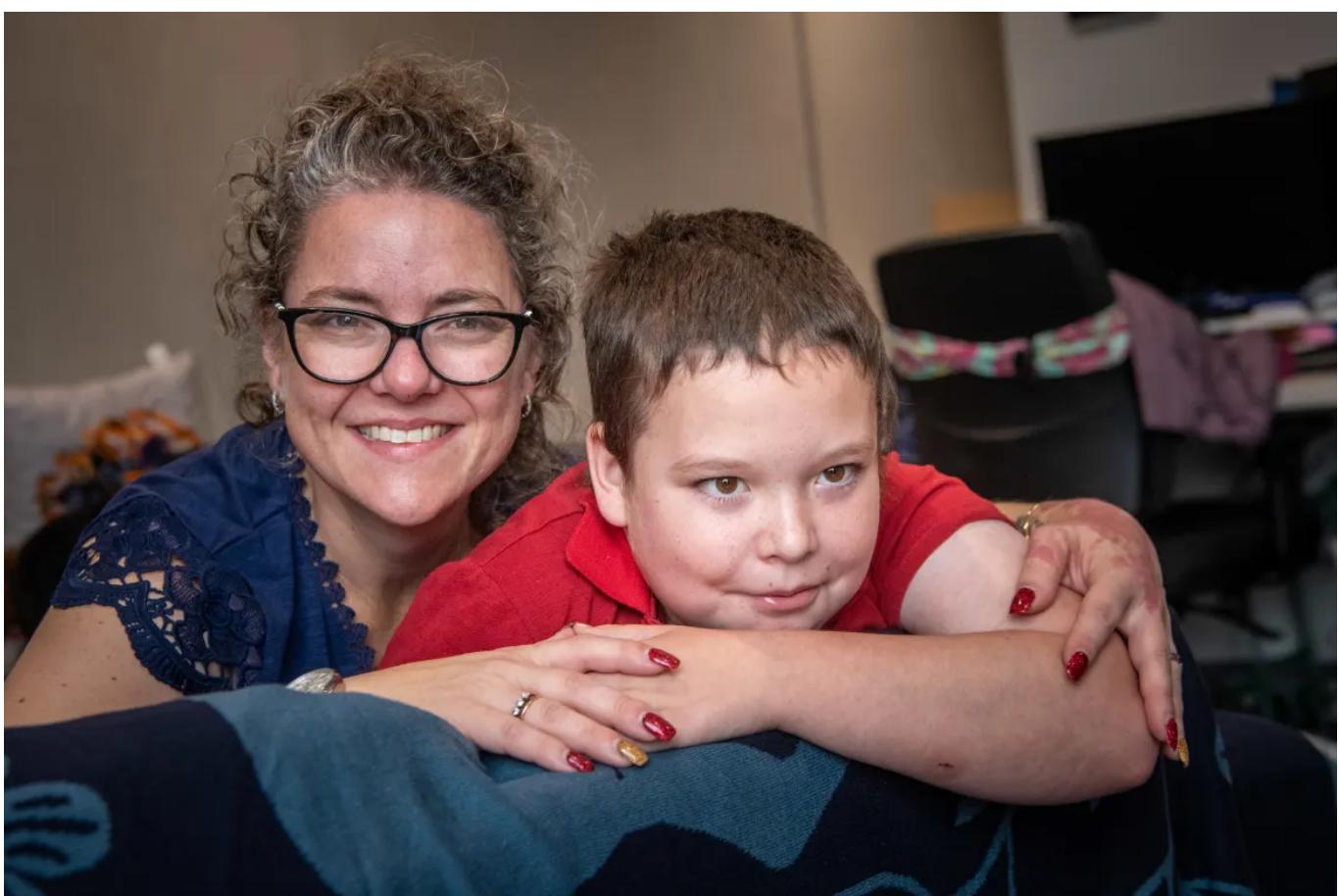
'More acceptable now': Medicinal cannabis use rising, passes 1 million patients

Stephen Brook and **Najma Sambul**

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Medicinal cannabis use is booming, with more than 1 million people prescribed the drug since it was legalised in 2016.

Last year, doctors prescribed the drug to 316,879 new patients, compared with 150,117 in 2021 and just 292 in 2018, according to the Therapeutic Goods Administration.



Aimee Sloan started on medicinal cannabis in November and her autistic son, Liam, is now taking the drug as well. JUSTIN MCMANUS

“It took a little while to gather speed, but the number of applications has increased exponentially,” said Llewellyn Mills, a senior research associate at the University of Sydney.

“It is more acceptable now to use medical cannabis on a societal level.”

Medicinal cannabis was made legal in 2016, but there is still limited evidence on its effectiveness. Most prescriptions are for the treatment of chronic pain, followed by anxiety, sleep disorders and cancer pain management.

TGA figures show there have been a total of 1.17 million Australian patients treated with the drug – through either authorised prescribers or a special access scheme – since it was legalised.

“It is an unusual drug, it has a cult-like reputation,” Mills said. “Evangelists for medical cannabis say it is a cure for everything; for others at the opposite end, it’s the devil.”

But acceptance is growing. Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland are reviewing drug-driving laws to treat medicinal cannabis like other prescription drugs. Specialist pharmacies have sprung up to dispense a variety of medicines derived from cannabis treatments that have two major ingredients: the compound CBD or THC, the psychoactive chemical that produces a “high” among recreational users.

On Saturday morning, 10-year-old Liam Sloan was happily chatting as he played on his iPad.

His mother, Aimee Sloan, couldn’t be happier. She said this was one of the many benefits she had seen since her son, who has autism, began using medicinal cannabis in January.



Dr James Stewart is cannabinoid clinician and founder of Herbal Health Clinics. DARRIAN TRAYNOR

When *The Sunday Age* visited Liam, who was non-verbal and rarely communicated his feelings, he greeted us with an enthusiastic, “Hi sister!”

“The words were always there, but he couldn’t get them out – and now he’s saying sentences,” Sloan said.

Sloan, who lives in Patterson Lakes in Melbourne’s south-east, began using CBD oil in November to help manage chronic pain from a motorbike accident. After an improvement with her own symptoms, she wondered if a prescription could help her son.

While debate continues about the efficacy of medicinal cannabis for the treatment of autism, Sloan said her son’s communication had significantly improved over the past five months.

He greeted and farewelled people with “hello” and “goodbye” and also sang along to songs, she said.

“He’s a completely different child,” Sloan, 39, said.

“He’s always been a happy kid, he’s got a beautiful nature and [is] always smiling. I had his teachers telling me he was chattier and more engaged.”

GPs need to get each patient treatment approved through the TGA, but some have “authorised prescriber status” and don’t need approval for every patient. Statistics on medicinal cannabis use are collated in a number of ways.



An Australian Natural Therapeutics worker prunes cannabis seedlings. JANIE BARRETT

More than 85 per cent of GPs have patients asking about the drug, but only 52 per cent felt comfortable discussing it with patients and nearly 70 per cent felt they had inadequate knowledge, a survey published in the journal, *BioMed Central Primary Care*, [in December](#) found.

“There is a very good amount of support for medical cannabis but there is a lack of comfort in discussing medicinal cannabis with patients which seems to be the barrier,” said lead researcher Zeeta Bawa, of the Lambert Initiative for Cannabinoid Therapeutics and the University of Sydney.

“There is an exponential rise in demand for it, but there is a lag in education for GPs. I do think GPs are being conservative about this but for good reason, the research for medicinal cannabis is up and coming and more needs to happen.”

Dr James Stewart, who founded the Herbal Health Clinics group and treats the Sloans, gave evidence last month at a federal parliamentary inquiry calling for medicinal cannabis to be considered for the treatment of brain trauma injuries in sport.

He told the Senate inquiry that another of his patients, [former NRL star Andrew Johns](#), no longer suffered seizures from repetitive head injuries after taking medicinal cannabis.

“I am trying to get out there and de-stigmatise and train and teach those doctors [who] are on the fence about cannabis medicine,” Stewart said.

"I'm hoping what comes out of that is that we'll get some funding to do a study next year, hopefully with the AFL and AFLW, NRL and NRLW around using cannabis, specifically mostly CBD products, to prevent the effects of concussion and also slow down and help with CTE [chronic traumatic encephalopathy]."

"Concussion is huge and lives have been torn apart."

"There is fantastic evidence to say that cannabis can help. So what I'm trying to do is reduce the stigma and let people know that cannabis is a medicine."

"It's not an illegal gateway drug. It's not about smoking cones. It's an oil and a medicine."

Liam Sloan is under treatment for ADHD and epilepsy; one medication, Risperidone, made him gain 15 kilograms. Medical advice suggested another ADHD drug, Ritalin, could help curb the weight gain.

"That's when I put my foot down," Sloan said. "Liam gaining that much weight was not good for his health."

Stewart prescribed both Aimee and Liam Sloan with CBD oil. A 25-day refill for both costs about \$500.

The federal government does not subsidise medicinal cannabis therapies on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

"It's not cheap," Sloan said. "It would be nice to see the government supporting medicinal cannabis more."

She hopes CBD oil will become more accessible to other families with autistic children in the future.

"We didn't know whether Liam was ever going to talk," she said. "CBD oil has changed both of our lives and it should be easily available to other families."

Mills said the commercial sector had entered the market with cannabis access clinics, which do the compliance paperwork on behalf of patients.

Chemist Warehouse has joined a medicinal cannabis joint venture between listed health and wellness company Wellnex Life and Melbourne's OneLife Botanicals.



Aimee Sloan spends about \$250 a month on CBD oil for her son Liam, 10. JUSTIN MCMANUS

[**Andrew Forrest's health tech venture capital group, Tenmile**](#) – which is backed by his family company, Tattarang – has invested in medicinal cannabis drug developer Emyria.

"I am hoping it doesn't go down the US model where it jumps from being illegal to being aggressively marketed for conditions for which it is not medically helpful," Mills said.

"In the US, there is a lot de facto recreational use under the guise of medical use."



Rachel Payne was elected for the Legalise Cannabis Party in last year's state election. JASON SOUTH

"There is no decent evidence that medical cannabis is effective in treating depression or anxiety."

Mills said the medical system and more doctors needed to engage on the treatment.

"Neither blanket acceptance nor blanket scepticism is helpful," he said. "We need a scientific approach."

In 2016, Victoria was the first state to approve medicinal cannabis. Unlike in Tasmania, there is no exemption for unimpaired drivers.

Road-safety laws make it an offence for drivers to have any presence of THC in their system, even if the effects of physical impairment have worn off and they have a prescription.

A private member's bill from MPs calling for medicinal cannabis to be treated [like other prescription medications for drivers](#) was introduced this year.

Victorian Legalise Cannabis MP Rachel Payne wants to provide a medical defence for users.

“To our surprise, it was so collegiate in the chamber, both sides of politics were very supportive,” she said.

“We are at that point the government do want to come to some sort of resolution, but it’s different to come to an outcome quickly as there are so many stakeholders involved.”

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