

Trial shows no clear benefit from cannabis for patients with MS

Owen Dyer *London*

The three year CAMS (cannabis in multiple sclerosis) trial, involving more than 600 patients in the United Kingdom, has yielded no definitive verdict on whether the drug can ease the symptoms of multiple sclerosis. The study, funded by the Medical Research Council, was published in last week's issue of the *Lancet* (2003;362:1517-26).

Fifteen weeks' treatment with oral capsules containing either whole cannabis extract or tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the drug's principal active ingredient, did not produce a significant improvement in spasticity as measured by the widely used Ashworth scale.

But in face to face interviews, patients assigned to the treatment arm of the double blinded trial were more likely than those receiving placebo to report a subjective improvement in symptoms. The participants reported significant improvements in pain, sleep quality, spasms, and spasticity, though not in irritability, depression, tiredness, tremor, or energy. The researchers found that patients taking the cannabis derivative showed an improvement in the time taken to walk 10 metres.

The proportion of patients reporting improvements in spasticity was 61% in the arm receiving cannabis extract (n=121, 95% confidence interval 55% to 68%), 60% in the arm receiving THC (n=108, 53% to 67%), and 46% (n=91, 39% to 53%) in the placebo arm.

The lead researchers, John Zajicek, consultant neurologist at Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust, and Professor Alan Thompson, consultant neurologist at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London, cautioned that about three quarters of the patients given cannabis had guessed they were taking active medication, and half of those receiving placebo had guessed that they were not receiving cannabis.

Dr Zajicek said: "The primary aim of the trial was to measure, as objectively as possible, the actual physical changes in limb spasticity in MS patients, and we found no evidence of this.

"Although we based the study around spasticity, we also wanted to capture any treatment effects among the other important symptoms described by people with MS. When patients were asked to describe how they felt that their symptoms, including spasticity, had been affected,



Dissolving marijuana leaves to produce medicinal cannabis

the picture was very different. They felt some of the impact of their painful and distressing symptoms had been eased.

"We did see a high placebo effect in this trial and it may be indicative of how much patients gain by taking part in clinical trials, irrespective of the treatment they are given. Patients experienced very few side effects from the treatments, and, given that how a patient feels is an impor-

tant part of improving health, cannabis based treatments may be of benefit to some patients."

Mike Barnes, professor of neurological rehabilitation at the University of Newcastle, said: "The results of this study are mixed, but the positive aspects undoubtedly outweigh the negatives. It is my hope that in the near future, people with MS will have access to cannabis derived medicines on the NHS." □

Another US healthcare giant is hit by scandal

Ray Moynihan *Washington, DC*

A medical entrepreneur from Alabama is facing charges that he ran an elaborate scheme to defraud shareholders of \$2.7bn (£1.6bn; €2.3bn), by devising fake assets and overstating earnings.

In March this year agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided the Birmingham offices of HealthSouth, a national chain of almost 2000 medical clinics and hospitals specialising in rehabilitation.

As a result of that raid the former chief executive officer Richard Scrusby last week

appeared in a federal court to hear the 85 charges against him. He was then forced to forfeit his passport and the keys to his private jet before being released on bail of \$10m. Mr Scrusby says he is innocent of the charges and looks forward to proving it when his case returns to court in January.

Mr Scrusby is one of the first chief executives to be criminally charged under laws—introduced in the United States after the Enron scandal—that carry tough penalties for people who lie about company accounts. If convicted he faces tens of millions of dollars in fines and dozens of years in jail.

HealthSouth is also facing a number of probes, including an investigation by federal health authorities into whether it has fraudulently overcharged Medicare for services provided to retired Americans.

The case is just the latest in a series of scandals in the United States involving private healthcare corporations and drug companies overcharging the publicly funded health insurance system for services and drugs.

The Tenet healthcare corporation recently paid out more than \$50m to settle allegations that its heart surgeons were operating on patients unnecessarily. In 2000 the hospital giant Columbia/HCA settled for \$745m allegations of overbilling.

In 2001 TAP Pharmaceuticals, a joint venture owned by the US drug firm Abbot Laboratories and Japan's Takeda, paid out almost \$900m in criminal and civil damages for paying kickbacks to doctors to prescribe the most costly drugs rather than the most cost effective drugs.

Fourteen executives have

already pleaded guilty to various charges of falsifying accounts at HealthSouth.

Mr Scrusby lives a flamboyant lifestyle. Along with his hundreds of millions in bonuses and share sales, his private jet, and his 27 m yacht, he sponsored a "girl band" called 3rd Faze and hired a former child TV star, Jason Hervey, to run the health company's public relations arm.

At hearings before a Congress committee investigating the scandal last Wednesday, the company's board members, bankers, and auditors were forced to explain how they had not noticed the \$2.7bn fraud. According to a committee member, Diana DeGette, one of the main problems with HealthSouth was that the board was "riddled with conflicts of interest." □