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MEETING ABSTRACT

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Medical students' knowledge and attitudes regarding medical cannabis

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Background: The beneficial medical properties of cannabis have been widely recognized for the treatment of a variety of diseases; however, future doctors in Serbia are receiving scant information about this topic through formal education. The aim of this study was to explore if clinical teaching and previous use of marijuana influence students' knowledge regarding therapeutic use and potential abuse of medical cannabis.

Methods: An anonymous questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 350 students of third, fifth and sixth year of integrated academic studies in medicine.

Results: Out of 350, the survey was completed by 316 students (response rate 90.3%). Approximately two-thirds (67.7%) of students were female, while approximately a third (105; 33.2%) of students reported lifetime use of marijuana. Students who had previously used marijuana were more familiar with both therapeutic and side effects ($p < 0.001$) of cannabis, as well as with potential cannabis abuse. Previous marijuana users were more familiar with the current legalization process in Serbia ($p = 0.006$) and a significantly larger number of them thought that the use of cannabis for therapeutic purposes should be legalized in Serbia ($p = 0.006$). The year of study did not affect the knowledge about the therapeutic and adverse effects of cannabis, nor the students' attitudes toward abuse and legislation.

Discussion: Students who had previously used marijuana significantly more frequently stated that they were familiar with possible therapeutic effects of medical cannabis and its side effects, which is in line with earlier studies conducted in Serbia and USA. No difference was observed between the year of the study with respect to therapeutic and adverse effects, implying that clinical teaching and hospital training during the fifth and sixth years of the study had no influence on students' knowledge with respect to medical cannabis. Students who have never used marijuana were more familiar with possible cannabis abuse. Likewise, an earlier study showed that greater belief in medical benefits and lower belief in medical risks were strongly associated with history of cannabis use. A significantly greater number of previous users believed that the use of cannabis for therapeutic purposes should be legalized in Serbia, which is also in agreement with other, similar studies. Students' knowledge correlated with previous marijuana consumption, as previous marijuana users were more knowledgeable about therapeutic and side effects, while students who never consumed marijuana were more aware of possible abuse. Year of the study had not significant influence both on the knowledge about medical cannabis and attitude toward its legislation. However, introduction of clinical teaching based on up-to-date research and clinical applications of medical cannabis is necessary in Serbia.

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