

Project Summary

Title: Synthetic Cannabis Dependence: A Survey of Clinician Perspectives on Symptoms, Services and Treatment

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Background

Synthetic Cannabinoid Receptor Agonists (SCRA) are chemical compounds which result in a psychotropic effect when consumed. SCRA's have been available to the public for over a decade in the form of "Synthetic Cannabis". Despite the name, SCRA's are not identical to cannabis, and several differences have been found in regard to their structure, pharmacology, and effects. There is considerable evidence that chronic or heavy SCRA use can result in dependence, however very few studies exist which report the clinical presentation or treatment.

Objective

The aim of the current study was to explore the presentation and treatment of SCRA dependence within Australia, as perceived by treating clinicians.

Method

A mixed-method descriptive study of the views of treating clinicians using quantitative content analysis and descriptive data analysis was conducted to explore the presentation and treatment of SCRA dependency in Australia. Clinicians were recruited as participants through a snowball approach begun by directly contacting Australian Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) services. Twenty-eight clinicians (n=28) with experience treating SCRA dependency completed an online survey. Participants predominately worked in outpatient settings, and had treated five or more SCRA dependent clients, for 3-4 years.

Results

Typical clinician-reported SCRA withdrawal symptoms were consistent with cannabis withdrawal, although cardiac symptoms and seizures were also reported. Four symptom clusters were identified. SCRA withdrawal was most commonly viewed as a moderate-to-severe condition. Of participants, 53.6% reported a change in presentations over the past few years, including an increase in the prevalence of SCRA and adverse effects. Common treatment approaches included CBT (60.7%), Motivational Interviewing (MI) (60.7%), and Supportive Counselling (60.7%). Treatment outcomes were commonly perceived to be similar to or poorer than that of cannabis dependence. The most commonly reported useful aspect of treatment was Psychoeducation and Detox. Challenges reported when working with SCRA dependence included managing symptoms and risks, client beliefs, and lack of relevant information.

Conclusion

While similar to other substance dependencies, SCRA dependence may not be identical. Further research is required to determine the most effective treatment for the condition.