

MS Ireland's Opinion On The Introduction of Sativex

Introduction

Multiple Sclerosis Ireland is the national organization providing information, support and advocacy services to the MS community – people with MS, their families, carers, health professionals and others. As part of MS Ireland's advocacy work we represent the concerns and opinions of people with MS to various government departments, agencies and groups. This document outlines MS Ireland's opinion on the introduction of Sativex, the cannabis based drug currently available in the UK and other countries to treat spasticity in people with MS. It represents the desire many Irish people have to avail of a symptomatic treatment that could have significant benefit to their condition.

Multiple Sclerosis

MS is a progressive neurological condition that affects the motor, sensory and cognitive functioning of the body. It usually develops between the ages of 20 and 40 and more than twice the number of women than men are affected. The cause is unknown but researchers believe that a faulty autoimmune response, genetic factors or other environmental factors such as climate or most recently a vitamin D deficiency, play a part in its development. It is estimated that over 8,000 Irish people have MS.

The presence, severity and duration of symptoms differ from person to person. However, common symptoms include fatigue; weakness in limbs; visual disturbances; balance; tremor; spasticity; tingling and altered feelings in limbs; pain; bladder and bowel dysfunction; and cognitive issues such as memory, problem solving and perception.

MS is treated in a variety of ways. There are a number of disease modifying therapies that delay the progression of the condition and reduce the number of relapses. Steroids reduce the inflammation associated with a relapse and various symptomatic treatments are also available. Rehabilitation is an important element in the management of MS as it can help to maintain or improve the functioning of certain parts of the body. Many people also use a variety of complementary therapies.

Spasticity

Spasticity refers mainly to the feelings of muscle stiffness, cramping or tightening and involuntary muscle spasms people experience in their limbs. It is a common feature of MS and in one of the largest international studies the North American Research Consortium released data in 2001 that showed 84% of American's with

MS experienced some level of spasticity. In 2010 an Irish study carried out by the University of Limerick as part of MS Ireland's Getting the Balance Right exercise and research programme, 68% of people with MS reported some degree of spasticity. The research also showed that 15% of participants cited spasticity as one of their three main problems with MS and 42% of participants took some form of spasticity medication.

Spasticity can significantly impact on a person's quality of life as it can hamper many of the activities of daily living such as dressing, walking, working, socializing etc. It can also cause a number of medical problems including skin breakdown and contractures, where a limb can become fixed in one position. It can also be challenging for carers as managing its impact can be difficult.

Spasticity can be treated in a number of ways. There are a number of medications that can be prescribed and surgery in some circumstances. Physiotherapy and a range of exercise and physical therapy techniques can be used to help with stretching, flexibility and overall mobility. MS Ireland's Getting The Balance Right physiotherapy and exercise programme runs throughout the country with the aim to improve the mobility and general health of people with MS through physiotherapy, yoga and other physical therapy interventions. Research conducted by The University of Limerick through the programme showed significant improvements in flexibility, balance, mobility and overall feelings of wellness. [Read more>>>](#)

Cannabis and Sativex

Cannabis has been associated with MS for a number of years based on the premise that the muscle relaxant effects of cannabis could be used to relieve aspects of spasticity. A number of research projects have explored the application of cannabinoid chemicals to treat spasticity and other symptoms of MS such as tremor and urinary tract infections. [Learn more here>>>](#)

In 2003 the Medical Research Council published details from their *Cannabis In MS* study (CAMS). The results were mixed as there was little statistical indication of improvements in spasticity. However, walking speed improved and improvements in spasticity were noted from participants self-reporting. A follow on study found that spasticity was improved over a longer period of time.

In March 2009 GW Pharmaceuticals announced results of two clinical trials involving Sativex and its effect on spasticity in people with MS. A phase III study involved 573 people with MS who were affected by spasticity and had not responded to existing therapies. 74% of people who continued treatment with Sativex achieved an improvement of greater than 30% in their spasticity score compared with 51% of people who were given the placebo treatment. There were also significant reductions in spasms and sleep disturbances and an improvement in the overall impression of change in the study participants.

A follow on study was also conducted with 36 people with MS who had been taking Sativex for an average of three and a half years. The participants either continued treatment with Sativex, or were given a placebo treatment for four weeks. At the end

of the study, people on the placebo treatment and their carers reported worsening spasticity compared with people taking Sativex.

Sativex is now licensed in the UK as an add-on treatment for MS-related spasticity when people have shown inadequate response to other symptomatic treatments or found their side effects intolerable.

Ireland and Sativex

In 2011 MS Ireland appeared on TV3's Morning Show to speak about cannabis and Sativex. Person with MS Brendan Rigger from Kerry also appeared on the show and spoke about his experience of using cannabis. Suffering from tremors which are "like electrical shocks going up my legs" Brendan smoked cannabis at night so that the tremors would ease so he would be able to sleep. Brendan is a single father of three school kids so a good nights sleep is important so his is able to look after his kids. Brendan was prosecuted for growing two cannabis plants in his garden. [Learn more>>>](#)

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Brendan is one of many Irish people with MS who has used street bought cannabis to relieve symptoms such as spasticity, pain or tremors. The decision to source cannabis illegally often comes from the fact that the person gets some or more relief from the effects of inhaling or ingesting cannabis than other traditional methods of treating spasticity.

At the end of This document we can included some contributions from members regarding their experience of using cannabis for MS related problems.

In MS circles the introduction of Sativex has been a significant development in symptomatic treatment. As disease modifying therapies only go so far the relief of symptoms plays an important role in the management of specific aspects of MS and their affect on daily living.

As MS Ireland understands it, Sativex cannot be prescribed in Ireland as it would breach the regulations in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. Unlike some jurisdictions Ireland does not recognize the medicinal use of cannabis or it's derivatives. On a related matter the legislation also prevents people travelling to Ireland from bringing medications with them that have been legally prescribed in another country. There are other issues here regarding the Schengen Agreement but the main issue lies in the clauses with the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977.

MS Ireland's Opinions

Generally, MS Ireland believes that

- People with MS should have access to all and any appropriate and licensed treatments that would improve or assist in the management of their MS
- Treatments and interventions available to people with MS should undergo rigorous research to assess their efficacy, tolerance and side effects
- Treatments and interventions available to people with MS should be licensed appropriately and administered by the trained professional

Specifically, MS Ireland believes that

- The current legislation in relation to cannabis should be revised to allow the prescribing of Sativex in Ireland
- Sativex should be added to the treatment options of prescribers as per the indications of the product
- People with MS travelling to Ireland with legally prescribed cannabis products should be allowed entry and travel with the country.

Conclusions

Sativex has been proven to have benefits in treating spasticity in MS. People with MS should have the choice to use and benefit from this treatment to assist them manage the affects spasticity may have to their life. The legislation should be reviewed and amended so Sativex can be prescribed in Ireland.

A personal Experience

The following text is from a person with MS and outlines the benefits he gets from cannabis. The person's name has been changed.

Brain, 30, Cork

"Since diagnoses life has changed. My limp has never fully gone away, I can walk only about 2km at most before my legs completely stiffen up and I have to sit down. The muscles in my right leg are very stiff all the time (for which I get physio every now and then which helps loosen the muscles). I have stabbing type pains on both legs which are not too bad most of the time but get worse in the evening. I got optic neuritis in June 2010 which has not fully gone away as I have partial vision in my left eye.

I have pins and needles in both arms and legs at all times which is very, very annoying. The pins and needles don't prevent me doing any thing but its irritating and a constant reminder there is something wrong with my body. As well as the pins and needles I experience an electric type sensation down my spine and out through my arms and legs. This feeling of electricity is not constant but occurs at least 3 - 6 times per week and lasts for hours.

At night my legs kind of twitch and move by themselves which impacts on my sleeping. This happens during the day as well but it is not that noticeable as I walk a bit at work and it is only noticeable when I stand up after sitting at my desk.

As for cannabis, this is the only drug which gets rid of 90% of the symptoms for a short period of time. The only symptom it does not affect is the optic neuritis. Cannabis loosens up all the stiff leg muscles, gets rid of all the pins and needles in my arms and legs, it removes the electric type feeling in my arms and legs. I still like to remain as active as possible and the use of cannabis helps me do this. I find when I use cannabis I can walk 3 to 5 km, do any physical activities I need to do such as gardening etc.

I like to tell people who ask me why I use cannabis that it makes me feel normal. If only for an hour or so I feel normal for that hour. I don't feel like my body is electric and twitching.”

This document has been prepared by Taragh Donohoe, Communications Manager, MS Ireland. Comments, corrections and suggestions can be made via email or phone – 01 678 1600 or taraghd@ms-society.ie

Multiple Sclerosis Ireland is the only national organisation providing information, support and advocacy services to the MS community. We provide a range of services and resources including individual and family support; living with MS programmes; respite and therapy care; counselling; social support and financial assistance through a voluntary Branch network; information and education; research; and lobbying.

To learn more about MS or the services we provide nationwide:

Tel: 00 353 (1) 678 1600 | **Web:** www.ms-society.ie | **MS Information Line:** 1850 233 233

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