

Medicinal Cannabis Survey of Registered Doctors

October 2003



Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

- ◆ With the conclusion of the Health Select Committee (HSC) “Investigation into the Public Health Strategies Related to Cannabis Use and the Most Appropriate Legal Status”, there has been considerable debate regarding the medicinal use of cannabis.
- ◆ The HSC report recommends that the government “pursue the possibility of supporting the prescription of clinically tested cannabis products for medicinal purposes”.
- ◆ If medicinal cannabis is made available on prescription, it is doctors that would be at the “coal-face” – discussing the option with patients and making the decision (in conjunction with the patient) as to whether cannabis is the best medicine for them.

Introduction continued

- ◆ The Green Party of Aotearoa were concerned to note that registered doctors had not been consulted regarding their views on the issue, nor was there any available information regarding the level of knowledge that doctors currently held regarding medicinal cannabis.
- ◆ The Green Party made the decision to undertake an indicative study to determine:
 - 1) The level of knowledge held by doctors in New Zealand
 - 2) Doctor's views on current medicinal use of cannabis and potential use of medicinal cannabis.
 - 3) Whether doctors felt that they should be able to prescribe medicinal cannabis.

Method & Sample

- ◆ A self completing mail survey was used.
- ◆ The surveys were posted out to recipients in May 2003, and they were asked to fax or post their responses back.
- ◆ A reminder letter was sent out after 2 weeks.
- ◆ The survey was sent out to 500 doctors randomly chosen from the Medical Council register (which listed 11,874 registered doctors who were not visiting the country or probational).
- ◆ The register is separated into a General Register (5,485 doctors) and a Vocational Register (6,389 doctors).
- ◆ 250 doctors were chosen at random from each register.
- ◆ Certain vocations (neurology, neurophysiology, ophthalmology and oncology), were oversampled in order to ensure those vocations would be represented (this was due to low numbers of these vocations nationwide).
- ◆ Achieved Response Rate: 225 valid replies were received (45% response rate)
- ◆ NB. A valid reply was considered a completely or partially filled in survey form.
- ◆ Many respondents also sent in comments with their survey

Analysis Issues to Consider

- ◆ It was noted that Ophthalmologists replied to the survey in disproportionately greater numbers than other vocations (24% of respondents). It is possible that this is because of a recent article in “Survey of Ophthalmology” Journal which discussed alternative remedies for glaucoma, including cannabis. Some respondents referred to this article in notes attached to their survey forms.
- ◆ Additionally, many ophthalmologists noted that their opinions were restricted to cannabis use within the field of ophthalmology only, and they did not feel able to comment on the wider medicinal uses of cannabis.
- ◆ Therefore, results were analysed with and without ophthalmologists to determine whether the number of responding ophthalmologists skewed the results (section 1).
- ◆ Results were also analysed in relation to the level of knowledge reported by doctors (section 2).

Analysis Issues to Consider cont.

- ◆ There is a possible motivational bias in relation to self rating knowledge. Those with a strong bias against or who are un-interested in the issue of medicinal cannabis may rate themselves with “sufficient” knowledge to indicate they do not feel the need to increase their knowledge level, whereas those with an interest in the issue are likely to have engaged in research and possibly rate themselves as having a “high” level of knowledge.
- ◆ Many doctors commented that the survey did not differentiate between smoked and non smoked methods of delivery, and that their support of medicinal cannabis was dependant upon this, i.e they would or may be supportive of medicinal cannabis if it were available as tablets but would not support medicinal cannabis which was required to be smoked.
- ◆ Interest in medicinal cannabis use varied considerably between vocations.
- ◆ The sample error is 6.5%



SECTION ONE

- ◆ **Total Sample**
 - **Ophthalmologists Vs Other Doctors**



Summary of Results

Section 1: Total Sample

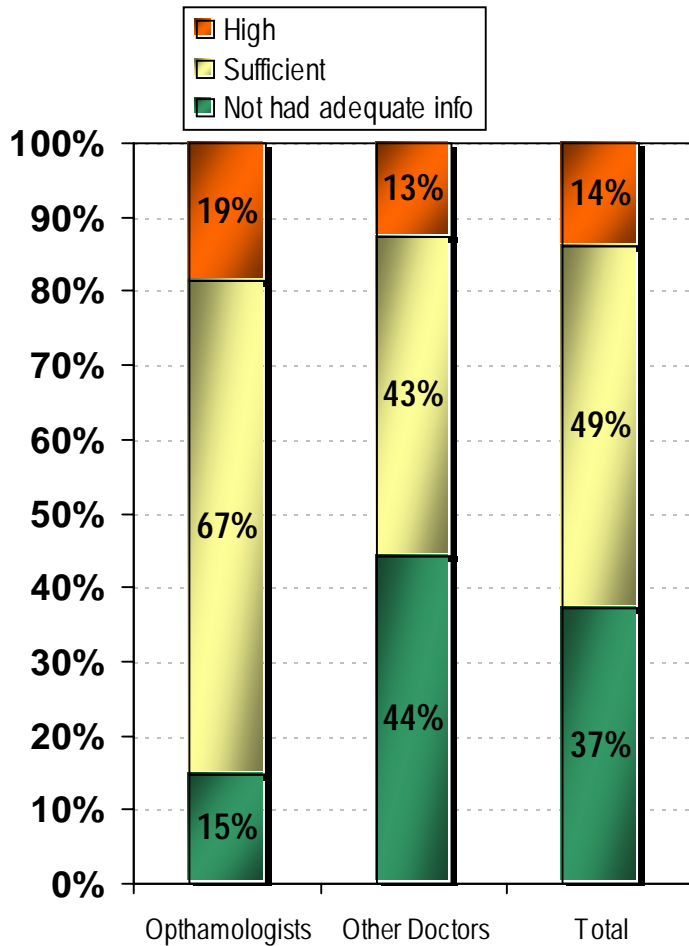
- ◆ 37% of doctors felt they did not have sufficient knowledge about the potential medicinal uses of cannabis.
- ◆ 32% of doctors indicated they would consider prescribing medicinal cannabis products if it were legal to do so.
- ◆ Very few doctors had ever recommended medicinal use of cannabis to a patient (6%) regardless of vocation.
- ◆ 10% of doctors indicated that they currently had patients who would benefit from medicinal cannabis.
- ◆ 20% of doctors currently have patients whom they know are using cannabis medicinally.
- ◆ 47% of doctors report knowing of patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use.
- ◆ 30% of doctors indicated that they thought medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes.

Summary of Results

Section 1: Ophthalmologists vs Other Doctors

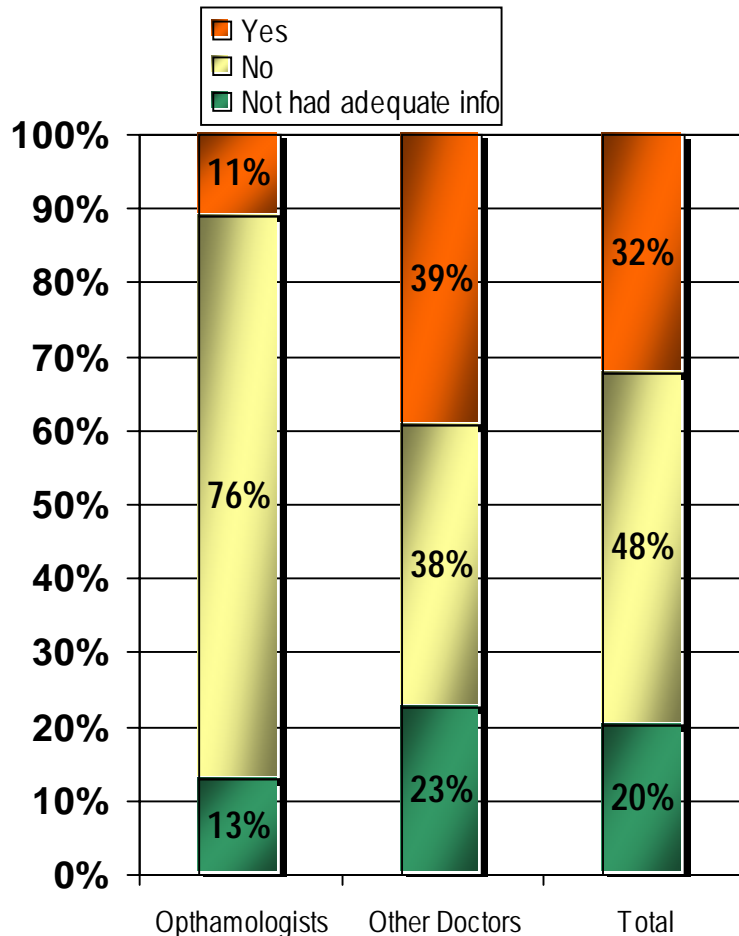
- ◆ Ophthalmologists reported themselves to be better informed about medicinal cannabis than other doctors (86% reported high or sufficient knowledge).
- ◆ Other doctors indicated a lower level of knowledge (56% reported high or sufficient knowledge) with 44% reporting they did not feel they had adequate knowledge.
- ◆ 39% of Other Doctors and 11% of ophthalmologists indicated they would consider prescribing medicinal cannabis if it were legal to do so.
- ◆ More Other Doctors report currently having patients who could benefit from medicinal cannabis (12%) than do ophthalmologists (4%).
- ◆ 24% of Other Doctors report currently having patients who they know are using cannabis medicinally vs 9% of Ophthalmologists.
- ◆ 69% of Ophthalmologists vs 40% of Other Doctors reported knowing of patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use
- ◆ 33% of Other Doctors vs 23% of Ophthalmologists thought medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products.

How would you rate your level of knowledge about the potential medicinal uses of cannabis?



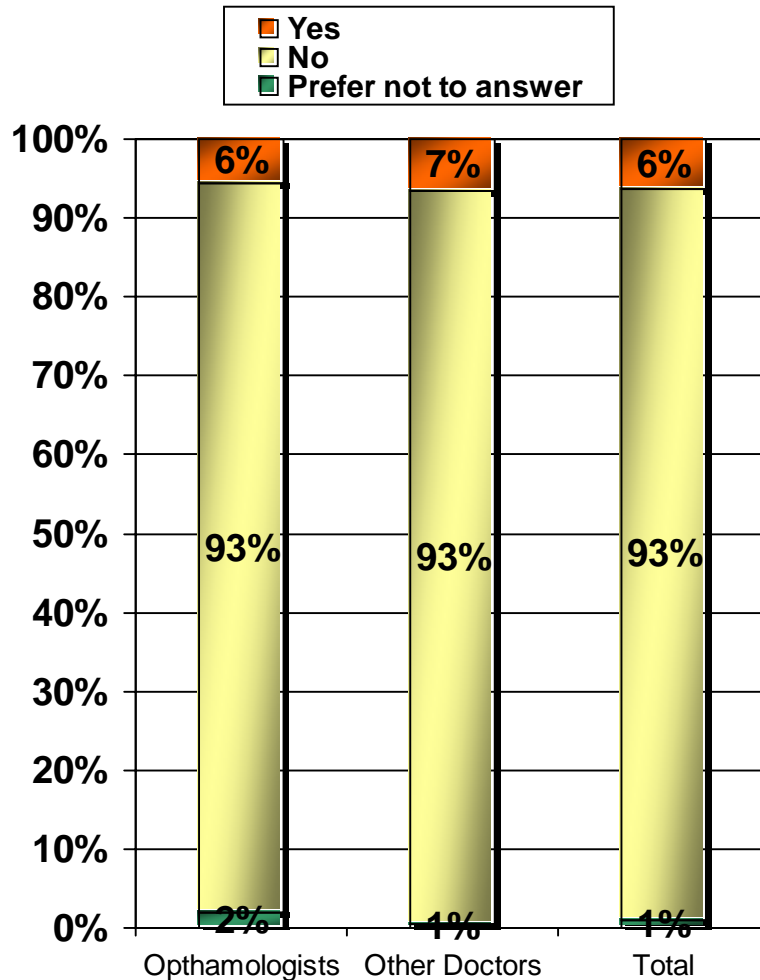
- ◆ Ophthalmologists reported themselves to be better informed about medicinal cannabis than other doctors (86% reported high or sufficient knowledge on the potential medicinal uses of cannabis) – but often specified their knowledge was confined to the area of ophthalmology e.g. “as far as its use in ophthalmology” - Ophthalmologist
- ◆ Other doctors indicated a lower level of knowledge (56% reported high or sufficient knowledge) with 44% reporting they did not feel they had adequate knowledge.

Would you consider prescribing medicinal cannabis products if it were legal to do so?



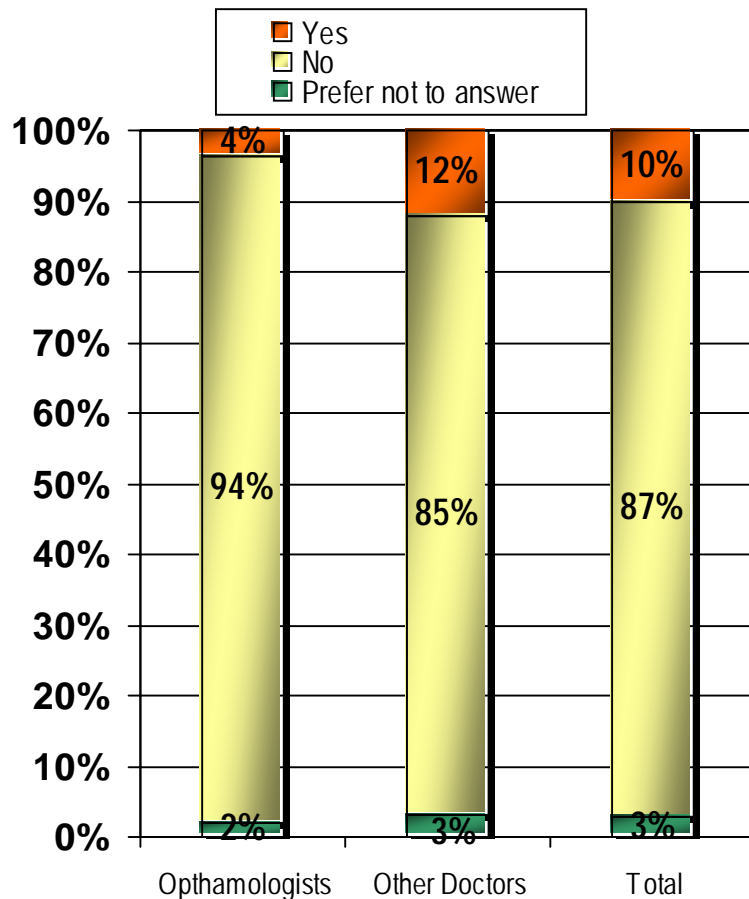
- ◆ Approximately the same numbers of doctors (other than ophthalmologists) indicated they would consider prescribing medicinal cannabis (39%) as indicated that they would not prescribe medicinal cannabis (38%), if it were legal to do so.
- ◆ Ophthalmologists were less likely to consider prescribing cannabis. However, many wrote additional notes stating that they were only referring to glaucoma.
- ◆ *"I do not think that claims should be made that cannabis has a role in treating glaucoma. I am not equipped to comment on uses of cannabis in other medical area – my comments solely relate to treating glaucoma"*
- ◆ *" Survey of Ophthalmology (a major international ophthalmic journal) published a review of alternative therapies for glaucoma. Cannabis is well known for its ability to lower intra-ocular pressure. The problems were"*

Have you ever recommended medicinal use of cannabis to a patient?



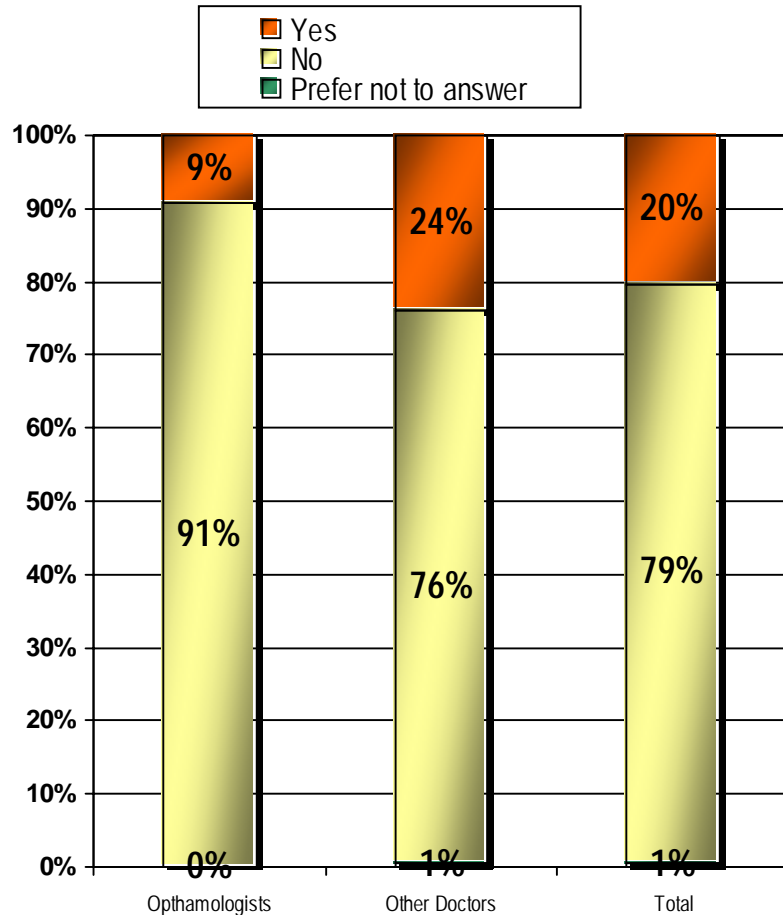
- ◆ Very few doctors had ever recommended medicinal use of cannabis to a patient (6%) regardless of vocation.

Do you currently have any patients whom you feel could benefit from medicinal cannabis?



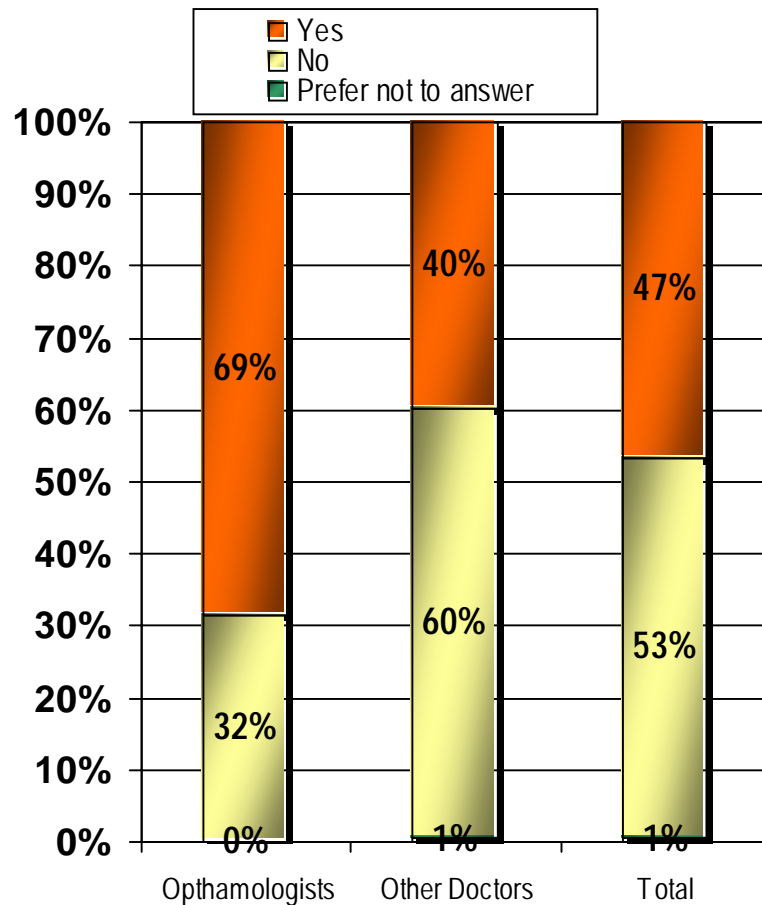
- ◆ 10% of respondents indicated that they currently had patients whom would benefit from medicinal cannabis.
- ◆ More doctors (other than ophthalmologists) report currently having patients who could benefit from medicinal cannabis (12%) than do ophthalmologists (4%).
- ◆ Many ophthalmologists noted that they were only referring to their area of expertise and could not comment on other areas of medicine.

Do you currently have patients who you know are using cannabis medicinally?



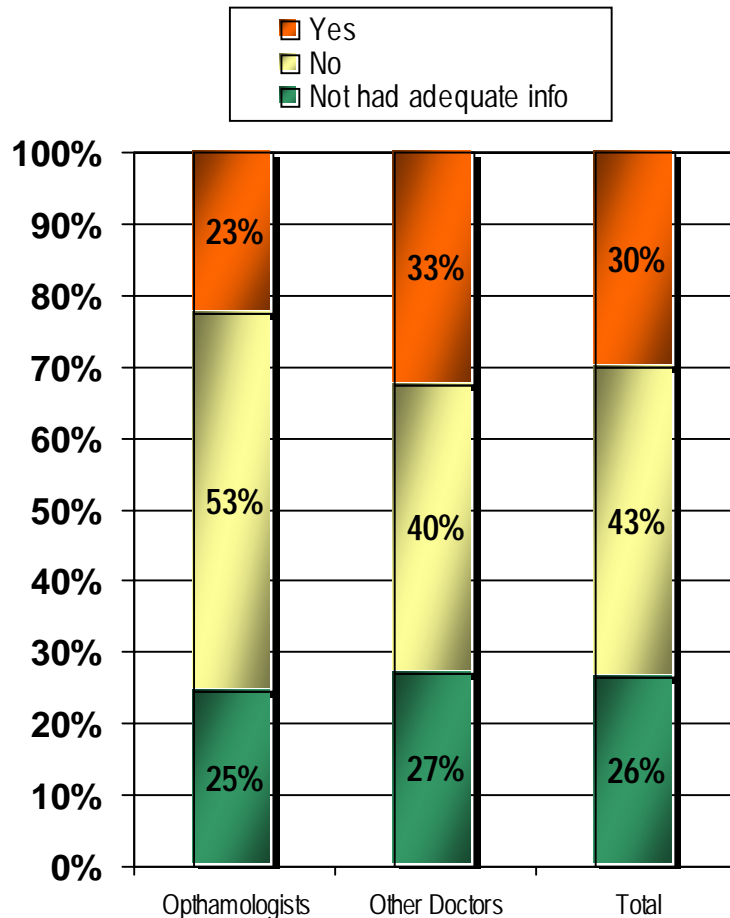
- ◆ 24% of doctors (other than ophthalmologists) report currently having patients who they know are using cannabis medicinally.
- ◆ Ophthalmologists were less likely to report currently having patients whom they know are using cannabis medicinally (9%)
- ◆ *"Had patients previously who openly admitted to it" – Oncology*
- ◆ *"Patients of mine have used cannabis soaked in brandy to cope with arthritis, they say with good results. I can see no harm in it for an old person. I have never seen anyone physically damaged by cannabis – I have and continue to see many many destroyed by alcohol" – Ophthalmologist*

Do you know of any patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use?



- ◆ 47% of doctors report knowing of patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use.
- ◆ 69% of Ophthalmologists reported knowing of patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use.
- ◆ This may give an indication of why more ophthalmologists reported themselves of being of high or sufficient knowledge (83%) than other doctors. Cannabis use for glaucoma has often been referred to by the media, which may have led to an increase in patients discussing the option with ophthalmologists.

Do you think medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes?



- ◆ 30% of doctors indicated that they thought medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes.
- ◆ Ophthalmologists were less likely to think this (23%) and other doctors slightly more so (33%).
- ◆ Ophthalmologists frequently added a note to the effect that they were referring only to cannabis use by ophthalmologists.
- ◆ Many doctors added a note explaining that they were against prescribing cannabis products if smoking it were the mode of delivery, due to health concerns and problems ensuring an accurate dosage, but that they may be in favour of cannabis products which were proven in recognised, randomised, controlled trials and delivered by e.g. tablets, IV ampoules, nasal spray or metered dose inhaler.

Most of these doctors indicated "No" or "Not had enough information" on their survey.



SECTION TWO

◆ Analysis By Knowledge Rating

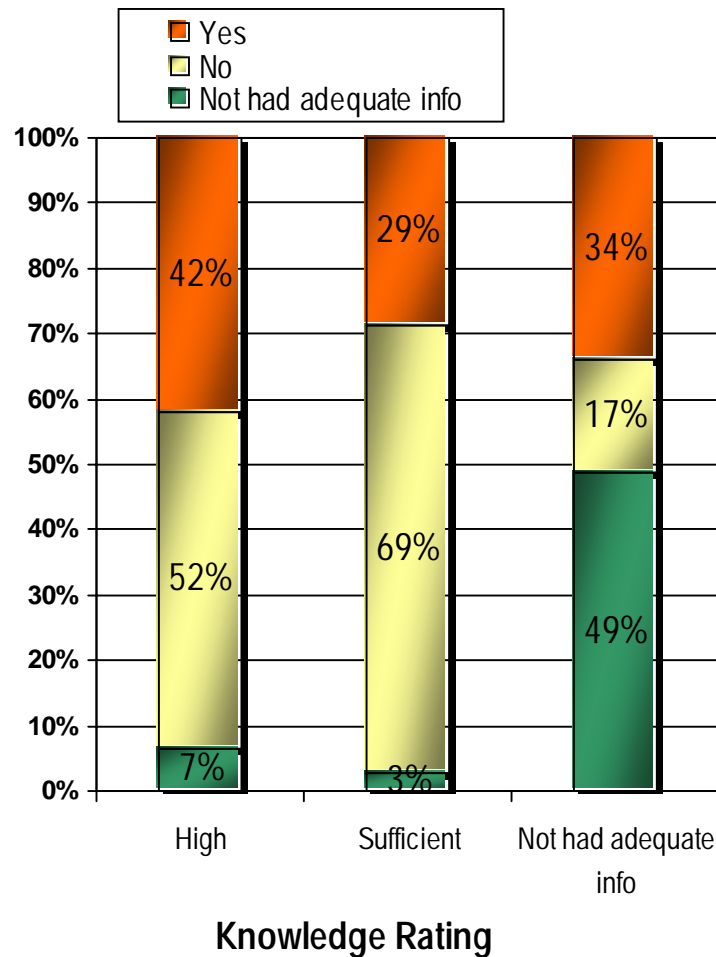
Summary of Results

Section 2: Results in relation to Knowledge Rating

- ◆ **Doctors who rated their knowledge as “High” were:**
 - ❖ more likely to consider prescribing medicinal cannabis products if it were legal to do so (42%) .
 - ❖ more likely to have ever recommended medicinal use of cannabis to a patient (23%).
 - ❖ more likely to currently have patients whom they felt would benefit from medicinal cannabis (23%).
 - ❖ twice as likely to currently have patients whom they knew were using cannabis medicinally (36%).
 - ❖ were considerably more likely to have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use (87%).
 - ❖ more likely to think that medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes (40%).

Would you consider prescribing medicinal cannabis products if it were legal to do so?

- by knowledge rating

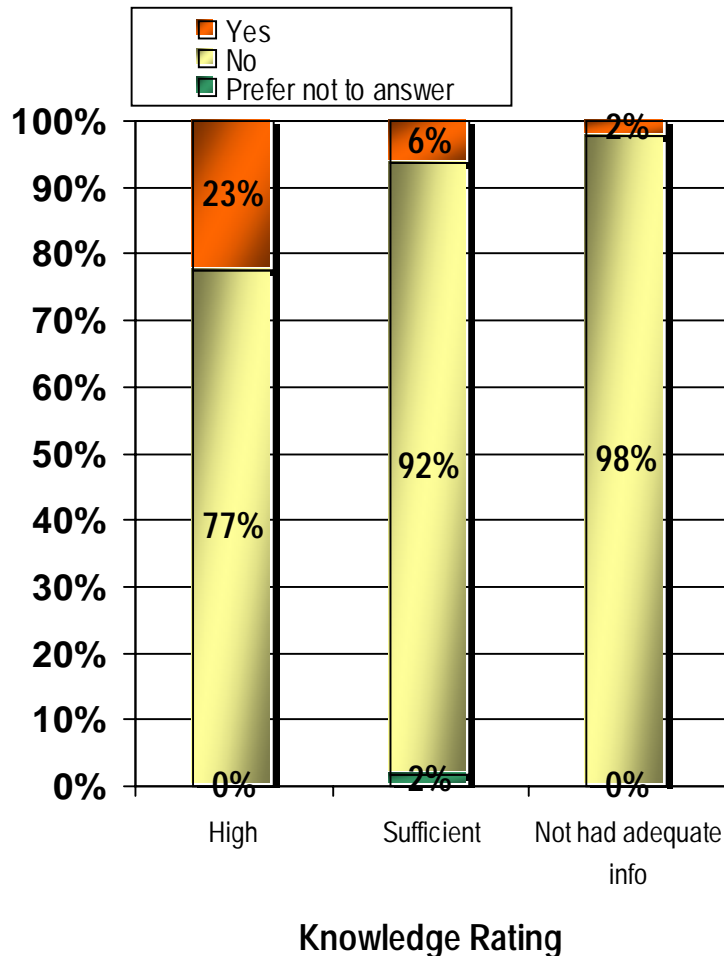


- ◆ Doctors who rated their knowledge as "high" were more likely to consider prescribing medicinal cannabis products if it were legal to do so (42%).
- ◆ Doctors with a strong opinion against medicinal cannabis, or who are uninterested in the issue of medicinal cannabis, may rate themselves as "sufficient" knowledge –indicating they do not feel the need to increase their knowledge level.
- ◆ This may be a factor in why fewer doctors who rated themselves as "sufficient" knowledge would consider prescribing medicinal cannabis (29%) than either those who rated themselves as high" (42%) or "not enough information" (34%).
- ◆ *"I would not advise patients to smoke anything. If THC was available in oral form I have an open mind to trying it where conventional analgesia is not working."* - Surgery

Of total sample:
High knowledge = 14%
Sufficient knowledge = 49%
Not Enough Information = 37%

Have you ever recommended medicinal use of cannabis to a patient?

- *by knowledge rating*

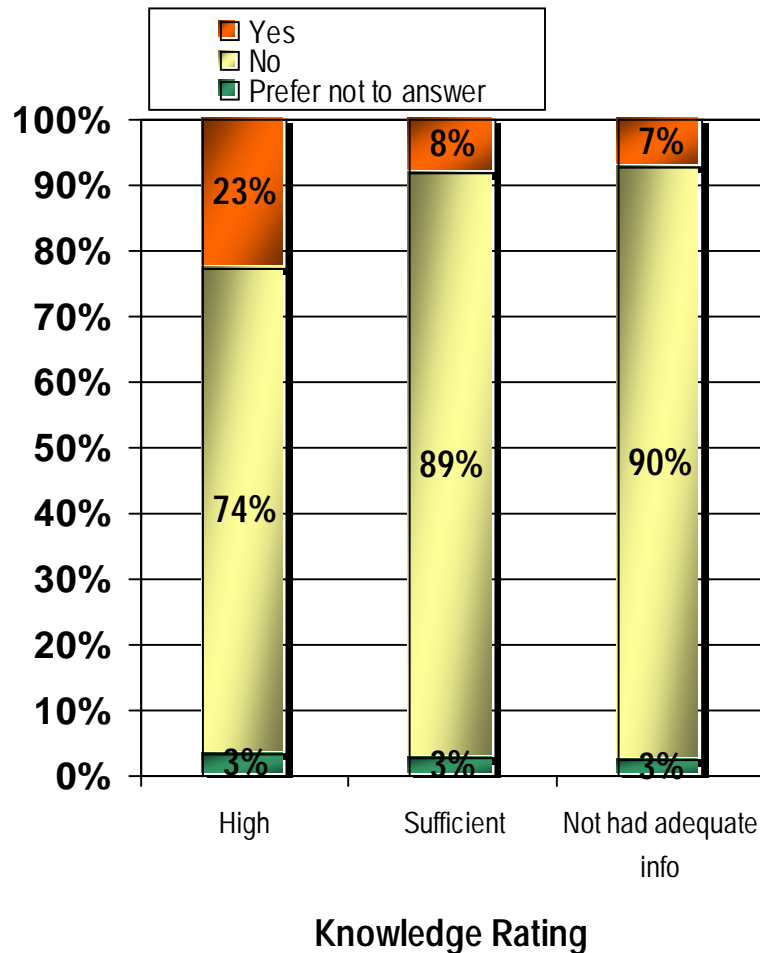


◆ Doctors with a “High” knowledge rating were more likely to have ever recommended medicinal cannabis to a patient (23%), than those with “sufficient” (6%), or “Not had adequate information” (2%).

Of total sample:
High knowledge = 14%
Sufficient knowledge = 49%
Not Enough Information = 37%

Do you currently have any patients whom you feel could benefit from medicinal cannabis?

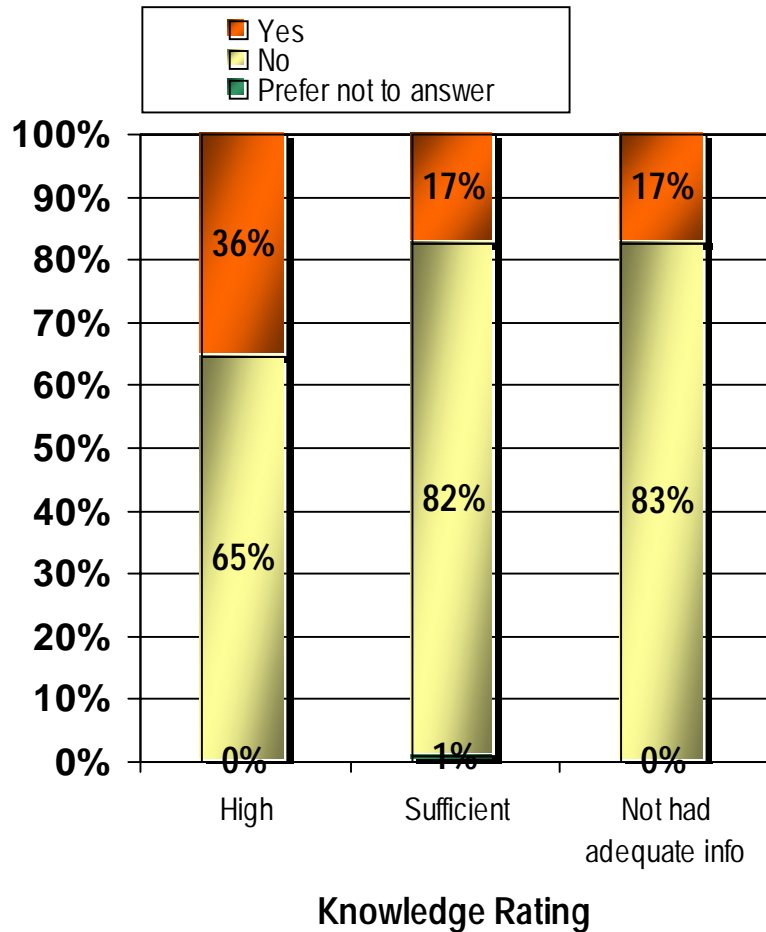
- *by knowledge rating*



- ◆ Doctors with a “High” knowledge rating were more likely to currently have patients whom they felt would benefit from medicinal cannabis (23%), than those with “sufficient” knowledge (8%) or who indicated they “had not had adequate information” (7%).

Of total sample:
High knowledge = 14%
Sufficient knowledge = 49%
Not Enough Information = 37%

Do you currently have patients who you know are using cannabis medicinally?

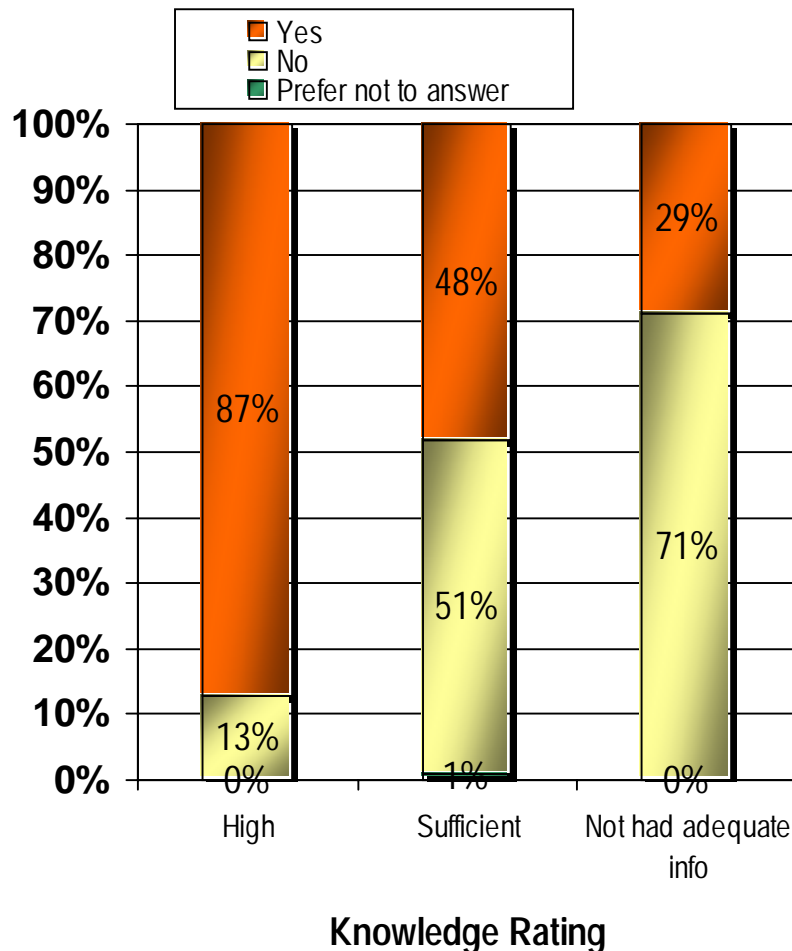


- ◆ Doctors with a “High” knowledge rating were twice as likely to currently have patients whom they knew were using cannabis medicinally (36%) compared to doctors with “Sufficient” knowledge (17%) or those who had not had adequate information (17%).

Of total sample:
High knowledge = 14%
Sufficient knowledge = 49%
Not Enough Information = 37%

Do you know of any patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use?

- *by knowledge rating*

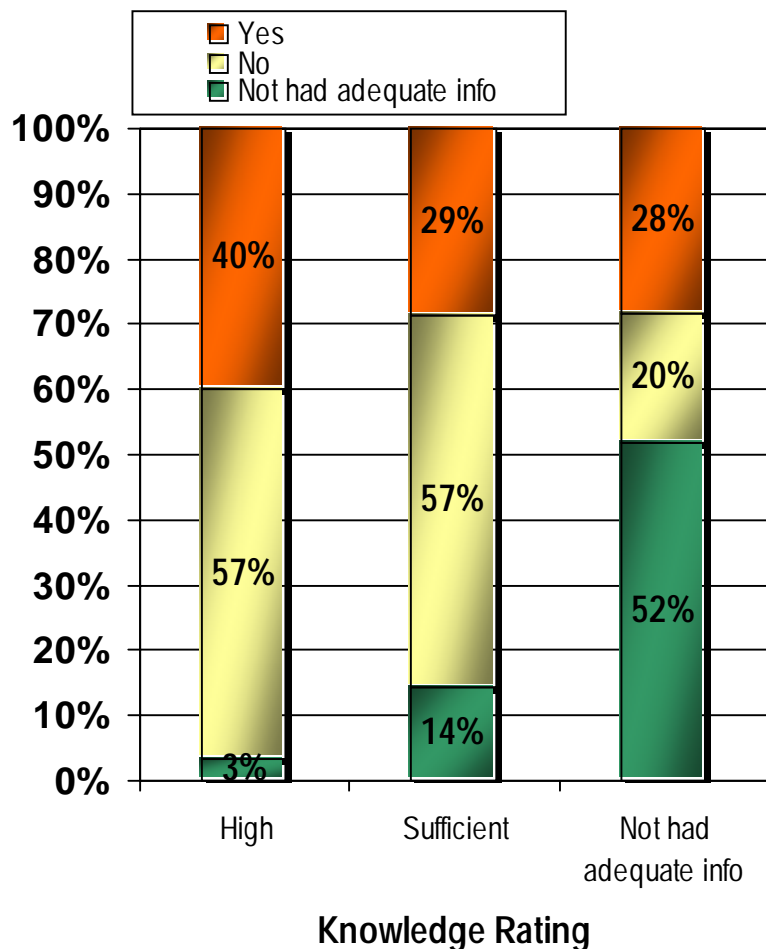


- ◆ Doctors with a "High" knowledge rating were considerably more likely to have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use (87%) than those who has "Sufficient" (48%) knowledge or "not had adequate information" (29%)

Of total sample:
High knowledge = 14%
Sufficient knowledge = 49%
Not Enough Information = 37%

Do you think medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes?

- *by knowledge rating*



- ◆ Doctors with a "High" knowledge rating were more likely to think that medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes (40%) than those with "Sufficient" knowledge (29%) or who had had "not adequate information" (28%).
- ◆ Many doctors added a note explaining that they were against prescribing cannabis products if smoking it were the mode of delivery, due to health concerns and problems ensuring an accurate dosage, but that they may be in favour of cannabis products which were proven in recognised, randomised, controlled trials and delivered by e.g. tablets, IV ampoules, nasal spray or metered dose inhaler.

Most of these doctors indicated No or not had enough information on their survey.

Of total sample:
High knowledge = 14%
Sufficient knowledge = 49%
Not Enough Information = 37%

Comments from Doctors

- ◆ *“If it is proven that cannabis is medically useful (in well recognised, randomised-controlled trials) then I would support its use in a medical setting” – GP*
- ◆ *“Other opiate based drugs for example morphine and codeine have been made available into oral forms; and I see no reason why cannabis couldn’t be similar.” – GP*
- ◆ *“Should be subjected to blind randomised controlled trials – ie class 1 evidence prior to introduction (the same as any other new drug). – Surgery*
- ◆ *“terminal care specialists only – not GP / physicians. I don’t think the potential cost is worth the benefit given the wide range of alternatives. Specialist oncology only would be appropriate” – GP*
- ◆ *“Certainly not as smoked” – Gyneacology*
- ◆ *“Cannabis raw not appropriate” – Palliative Medicine*
- ◆ *Oncologists only in my opinion - Paediatrics*
- ◆ *“ As your survey does not distinguish these two formulations (tablet vs smoked) I am not prepared to answer it in its current form, but would be happy to do so if there was a similar questionnaire on cannabis for smoking, which I would strongly object to; and tablet formulations of cannabis, for which I would offer some support” – Medical Oncologist*
- ◆ *Very useful in some chronic pain and palliative care patients – Emergency Dept.*

Comments from Doctors

- ◆ *“I do not think that claims should be made that cannabis has a role in treating glaucoma. I am not equipped to comment on uses of cannabis in other medical area – my comments solely relate to treating glaucoma” – Ophthalmologist*
- ◆ *“Patients of mine have used cannabis soaked in brandy to cope with arthritis, they say with good results. I can see no harm in it for an old person. I have never seen anyone physically damaged by cannabis – I have and continue to see many many destroyed by alcohol” – Ophthalmologist*
- ◆ *“ I would not advise patients to smoke anything. If THC was available in oral form I have an open mind to trying it where conventional analgesia is not working.”- Surgery*
- ◆ *Had patients previously who openly admitted to it – Oncology*
- ◆ *Perhaps in exceptional circumstances it proves a value. Not indicated in my field, the practicality of use would be a minefield – Ophthalmologist*
- ◆ *In certain specialities yes eg oncology – Emergency Dept.*
- ◆ *A refined cannabinoid with a known dose + pharmacology would be of some benefit in the way that morphine is currently used. The inconsistent concentration of active substances in raw cannabis along with the toxic components makes legalising the commonly available cannabis a health hazard. – Palliative Medicine*



Key Results

- ◆ **The more knowledge a doctor holds, the more favourable their opinion of medicinal cannabis is.**
- ◆ **There is a general lack of knowledge among doctors about medicinal cannabis.**
- ◆ **Interest in use of medicinal cannabis varies between vocations.**
- ◆ **Method of delivery has a major effect on the opinion of doctor's in regard to medicinal cannabis.**



Key Results

- ◆ **32% of doctors indicated they would consider prescribing medicinal cannabis products if it were legal to do so.**
- ◆ **47% of doctors report knowing of patients who have discussed the option of cannabis for medicinal use.**
- ◆ **30% of doctors indicated that they thought medical practitioners should be able to prescribe cannabis products for medicinal purposes.**



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