

APCF Terms of Reference

A study on the agricultural development of alternative medicine in South Africa

Background

Even before the publication of Medical Innovation Bill in government gazette in 2014, there was already a growing interest on the use of Cannabis for medicinal purposes in South Africa. This growing interest was not only limited to South Africa but around the globe. Several international organizations, such as American Academy of HIV Medicine, American Civil Liberties Union and HIV Medicine Association of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, have indicated their support for research into the treatment applications for the Cannabis.

In support of the above and within the scientific community, research is however on-going on the medicinal properties of Cannabis Sativa largely because over the years Cannabis has both disappointed and intrigued scientific researchers. Right from its early history of use to the current time, Cannabis has many claims to its fame, but rigorous scientific evidence is still lacking.

Despite lack of conclusive empirical evidence, a growing number of countries (such as Argentina, Bangladesh, Canada, Chile, Israel, Jamaica, Spain, Uruguay and some U.S. states) are decriminalizing Cannabis for medical use. Therefore, it can be argued that the interest on use of Cannabis beyond recreational use is not limited to scientific community but extend to politics and policy makers. South African government has made it clear that Cannabis will remain prohibited. This, therefore, means that until conclusive empirical evidence can be produced on the efficacy of Cannabis within the field of medicine, the status quo will remain in South Africa as clearly articulated in the Drugs and Drugs Trafficking Act of 1992 and the Medicines and Related Substances Act of 1965.

Plant properties

Marijuana, which is obtained from a Cannabis plant, is composed of dried flower tops and leaves. The fiber obtained from other parts of the plant is hemp, which is used in textiles,

paper, paints, and clothing. The plant has many compounds and chemical properties but the two main compounds frequently referred to are delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and Cannabidiol (CBD). The dried and compressed secretions from the same plant are referred to as "hashish," which is rich in THC. There are more than 400 chemicals in marijuana, many of which have varying degrees of toxic effects. Over the years, there has been an observed increase in the potency of marijuana. Scientists are hoping to develop synthetic cannabinoids that would have better properties. The variations in the potency of marijuana and the unique physio-chemical properties of THC have posed tremendous challenges in medical research. While the THC is said to have negative effects on the users, cannabidiol (CBD) is said to have positive effects.

Growing confusion is due to the fact that there are contradictory studies on the effects of or medicinal properties of Cannabis. For instance, a study by Springer and Glantz (2015)¹ argues that smoking marijuana is likely to have similar negative effects as those from smoking tobacco including second-hand smoking. Specifically, harmful effects of Cannabis are said to include acute, neurological, cognitive impairment, respiratory system, cardiovascular system, reproductive system. These and other similar studies are countered by a growing empirical work that emphasizes the emergent scientific status of Cannabis as a powerful curative agent for a growing range of chronic and terminal illnesses.

Study

APCF is calling on all interested researchers and research institutions to submit research proposals focusing on varied but relevant empirical research work on the medicinal properties of Cannabis in South Africa. Such research work should seek to effectively contribute to the current debate on the pros and cons of the plant within the field of medicine. It is worth noting that this empirical work should be conducted within the current legislative framework of South Africa that prohibits the use of Cannabis plant. Therefore, approval may have to be sought to conduct experiments.

While this terms of reference is specifically about Cannabis, researchers are encouraged to expand their focus to all areas within the field of indigenous knowledge system. This could include any other indigenous plants that are receiving increasing attention because of inherent medicinal properties (e.g. moringa, also known as the tree of life) but whose efficacy has not yet been conclusively and thoroughly researched.

¹ Springer, M and Glantz, SA (2015) Marijuana Use and Heart Disease: Potential Effects of Public Exposure to Smoke.

Research proposals should include the following, among others:

- a review of relevant literature
- focus area
- how the study will effectively contribute the discourse in South Africa
- socio-economic benefits
- timelines
- budget

Deliverable

A peer reviewed scientific research report