

# Wonder weed

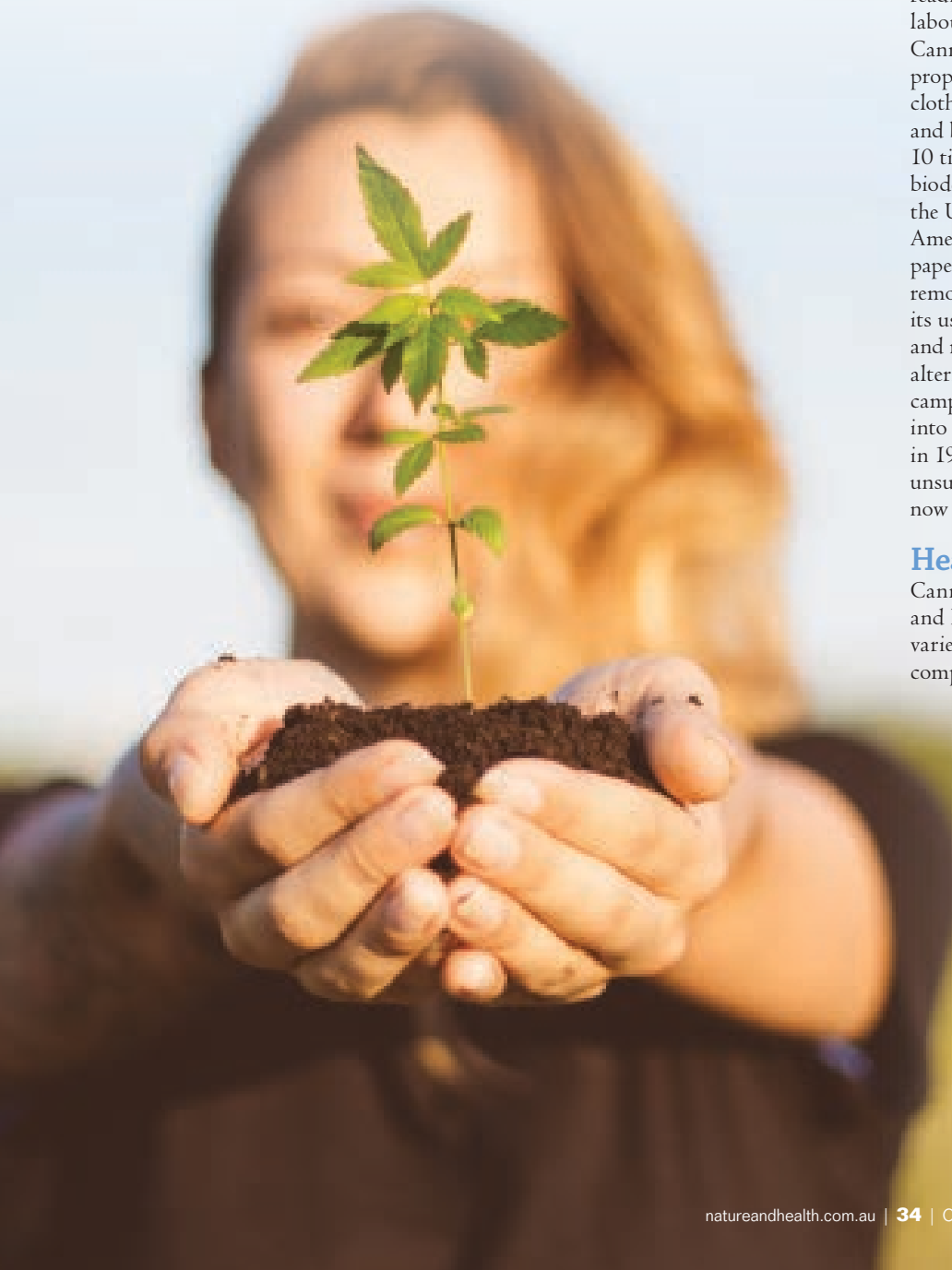
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*Medicinal marijuana is showing remarkable results in a range of difficult diseases, including epilepsy and cancer, writes naturopath Caroline Robertson.*  
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**C**ANNABIS can be traced back to ancient cultures where it was valued for health, recreation, rituals, and industry. It was used as an analgesic, anti-diarrhoeal, aphrodisiac, appetite stimulant, expectorant, euphoric, relaxant, and for glaucoma. Traditional formulas were always purified, mixed with synergistic ingredients and eaten. Minimal doses were advised as Ayurvedic texts cite excess marijuana causes apathy, dryness, digestive heat, delusions, and slurred speech.

Marijuana soon spread to the West with wide applications, including Queen Victoria smoking spliffs for period pain and John F. Kennedy pulling bongos for backache. Until 1942 it was listed in the US Pharmacopoeia and was readily available for nausea, rheumatism and labour pains. There are four main species. The *Cannabis sativa* L. plant doesn't have psychoactive properties and is a high-yield crop for rope, clothes, food, paper, textiles, plastics, insulation and bio-fuel. One acre of hemp produces up to 10 times more paper than trees and can make biodegradable plastic. Even the first drafts of the US Declaration of Independence and The American Constitution were written on hemp paper. Hardy hemp thrives without pesticides and removes radiation and toxins from soil, leading to its use at Chernobyl. The *Cannabis sativa*, *indica* and *ruderalis* species all have addictive mind-altering effects in high doses. A reefer madness campaign claiming wacky tobacco turns smokers into sex maniacs led to its prohibition in America in 1937. However this pot propaganda proved unsubstantiated and marijuana's therapeutic use is now legal in 29 US states and 20 countries.

## Healing high

Cannabis is a complex herb with many hybrids and hydroponic strains. There are unlimited varieties with particular phytochemical components, such as Charlotte's Web for



epilepsy and Pink Kush for sexual arousal. Herbalists prefer whole plant formulas because they offer phytosynergistic properties, buffering bad effects and increasing bioavailability, as opposed to isolated constituents. Cannabis contains over 500 constituents of which only the delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) compound is mind-altering. THC activates cannabinoid receptors to affect appetite, pain sensation, mood and memory. This is found more effective for Alzheimer's. The other therapeutic element is cannabidiol (CBD) which shows potent anti-cancer effects but doesn't get you high. Cannabis also contains anti-inflammatory, antibiotic and analgesic terpenes. Drug companies are developing quality controlled chemically distinct cannabis varieties for specific conditions. The Nimbin Hemp Embassy champions the right to grow and prepare one's own healing pot potions. Their website, [hempembassy.net](http://hempembassy.net), offers clear instructions how to prepare hemp oils, tinctures and infusions.

There's an encyclopaedia of convincing clinical, anecdotal and empirical evidence supporting medical marijuana for almost every ailment. Google 'medical cannabis cures' and you'll find touching testimonials that cannabis has eased cancer, ADD, ALS, arthritis, asthma, Alzheimer's, anorexia, anxiety, cerebral palsy, depression, insomnia, seizures, glaucoma, IBS, low libido, migraines, multiple sclerosis, nausea, pain, PTSD, Tourette's syndrome, and more. But it's not Puff the magic drug: cannabis works for some, and not for others. More rigorous double-blind clinical trials are required to establish the most effective applications, administration, contraindications, chronic effects and preparations of medical marijuana. Stringent standardisation in quality control and potency are essential to ensure optimal benefit and minimal harm. For a scientific overview of cannabis pros and cons, see [www.medicalmarijuana.procon.org](http://www.medicalmarijuana.procon.org).

There are only three problems proven to improve with medical marijuana according to a report analysing over 10,000 scientific studies from the US National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. It found strong evidence that medical marijuana decreased chronic pain in adults, decreased chemotherapy-induced nausea, and relieved some multiple sclerosis symptoms. There was moderate evidence that cannabis improved sleep in those with sleep apnoea, pain and multiple sclerosis. Former US Surgeon General, Dr Joycelyn Elders said, "The evidence is overwhelming that marijuana can relieve certain types of pain, nausea, vomiting and other symptoms caused by such illnesses as multiple sclerosis, cancer, and AIDS. And it can do so with remarkable safety."

## Legal limbo


Though an estimated one third of Australians over 22 have tried cannabis, it's only been legalised for therapeutic use since October 2016. However hemp is so hard to access legally that many patients are forced to obtain it illegally. At present the law maintains that medical marijuana must be prescribed by an authorised doctor to a patient who meets strict criteria, or go through the Special Access Scheme. Desperate patients then depend on imported cannabis which takes months to clear. South Australian MPs called medicinal cannabis a "mirage" because there are no doctors authorised to prescribe it there and only 23 authorised prescribers in Australia at the time of writing this article. A surprising champion for medical marijuana is politician Pauline Hanson who recently revealed, "I appealed directly to the Prime Minister to intervene and give amnesty to users and suppliers of this vital life-saving

drug, so people and families are no longer forced to use it in secret."

Some sympathetic suppliers are providing patients with illegal marijuana medicine at risk of prosecution. Among the pro-cannabis crusaders for patients' rights is 'Pot Doctor' Andrew Katelaris, who is now deregistered after challenging the cannabis drug laws. Another source is legally imported cannabis oil sold for exorbitant prices for 'external use only'. This cash crop is undoubtedly going to create a green rush soon, with a 2016 University of Sydney report 'Medicinal Cannabis' predicting that the Australian medicinal cannabis market will create an industry worth more than \$100 million a year. (In California it's a 14 billion dollar a year industry.) Pharmaceutical preparations of cannabis include Sativex for neuropathic pain and MS, Dronabinol for nausea and anorexia, Dexanabinol to protect the brain, and Cannabinor anti-inflammatory for chronic pain.

## Weed warnings

Much maligned marijuana is now esteemed as an effective medicine with minimal side effects when taken judiciously. Cannabis is extremely safe compared to other drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, opiates and methamphetamines. However Katoomba-based GP Teresa Towpik advises administration in oil or vapour form. "It shouldn't be smoked; that can increase bronchial irritations and reduce the potency," she said. Cannabis contains 50 percent more carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons than tobacco cigarettes because of its lower combustibility. Recent Canadian research also revealed marijuana smoke caused significantly more damage to cells and DNA than tobacco smoke.

In very high doses marijuana has proved to be addictive and to inhibit brain development in adolescents. Studies show marijuana in excess may aggravate anxiety, depression and increase risk of psychotic disorders. The same meta-study of 10,000 scientific studies found evidence that cannabis can increase respiratory problems, motor vehicle accidents, low birth weight in babies and schizophrenia. Paranoia associated with marijuana is less likely with a relatively high CBD:THC ratio preparation. However taken in low doses over short periods cannabis is deemed a safe natural remedy. 

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