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What Exactly Is “Cannabis Research?”

BY DR. JEFF G. KONIN

It is likely a safe assumption that if you are reading this edition of *Cannabis News Florida* that you take up some space in the cannabis world. Perhaps you come from the business angle, or the agricultural space, possibly analytical chemistry, healthcare, or many others. We make up an extremely diverse group of individuals who collaborate in one shape or another to achieve one of many common goals: understanding, achieving, and disseminating cannabis efficacy.

Each of our unique disciplines view “research” slightly differently. For example, in the medical and healthcare professions, we lean toward a commonly and possibly overused term called “evidence-based” research. This simply means that to be able to validate that something works, it has undergone the highest levels of clinical studies and has shown a statistical significance. We throw out terms such as meta-analysis, systematic reviews, and double-blind clinical trials just to name a few. By contrast, research knowledge such as those presented in a case study format, or by an expert opinion, are viewed to represent a lower level of acceptance. Additionally, such studies may be viewed differently if they were performed in a lab, on animal models, or proposed in theory as compared to human studies.

When one looks up the definition of “business research”, results yield a common theme that acquiring information in an effort to “make wise decisions, “maximize sales and profits”, or “interpreting market trends” just to name a few. In such cases, statistics may or may not be as important as the bottom line. This in no way minimizes the importance of the information. It simply involves a different process and/or approach and applies the data in a way to meet business-related goals.

Is there a connection or a disconnect with such different approaches and perception of cannabis-based research?

More than likely the answer to these questions is “yes” to both. There is clearly a connection that should occur between research grounded in business as well as research grounded in science. For example, if medical researchers find a statistical difference in favor of a positive intervention using a combination of or an isolate of a



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cannabinoid, the effective use for patients will only be successfully conveyed and disseminated through effective measures learned through marketing the product, identifying price points and margins, and ongoing improvements and findings. However, regardless of how good a product appears to demonstrate positive findings, if this is not conveyed in a professional business-like manner, it will not reach its potential from either a healthcare or a business perspective.

Where the majority of the industry to date has found itself is the polar opposite of what was just described. Though certainly not the case with all cannabis-based companies, many have in fact found successful business practices based upon their own internal research. The outcome has been positive, some finding greater success than others. However, few of the numerous cannabis-based businesses that manufacture and sell product to consumers have actually conducted the clinical research previously described to the standards expected in the medical and healthcare industry. Additionally, of those that have conducted product efficacy research, the majority have done so in-house. There is truly nothing wrong with this approach, as it does make sense to test one's own product. In fact, most would argue that it is an essential step that needs to take place to be able to stand behind a product and sell it to a consumer base. However, such findings and any statements claimed from one's own research will be viewed as being biased in opinion from those in the medical and healthcare industry. Think about it, have you ever seen a cannabis company put out information that they tested their own product, and it wasn't good? Of course not, so the expectation of any self-published or even just self-promoted “evidence” will be expected to state nothing but positive claims of one's own product. This is typically referred to having a conflict of interest – that is, those doing the testing have a financially vested interest in reporting positive results.

There is no shortage of business research in the cannabis space. In fact, as noted, many credible companies are performing their own-house product research as it relates to consumer benefits. In fact, some could argue that in a relatively new area of fast-growing interest that ample research already exists. For example, a simple National Library of Medicine search solely using the word “cannabis” yields over 27,000 published research articles. However, most healthcare providers do not read where these studies are being published: Plant

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Science, Molecules, or Nature as a few examples. Some do read journals like Addiction, and slowly more are paying attention to the Journal of Cannabis Research and Cannabis and Cannabinoid Research. It is a process. The area of research that could be served well is continued product research performed by 3rd party, independent testing researchers with results being published in journals that focus and emphasize clinical application. In particular, journals of specialized areas such as sports medicine, geriatrics, pediatrics, neurology and others would benefit from contemporary cannabis-based findings.

Society is at an international tipping point toward its views of cannabis. In some places, scientific research is leading the way. In others, business research is leading the way. Yet in other places, a disconnect remains that connects the two worlds absent any perceived or real conflicts of interest. Identifying models that address such concerns will be a key to the future success of any efficacious findings that cannabis intervention may play in the well-being of individuals. Likewise, studies without bias can produce true understandings of any concerns related to short or long-term adverse effects, unknown drug interactions, and potentially findings that haven't yet even been considered.

This is an opportunistic time to define cannabis research in a collaborative way that is inclusive of all those vested in the industry.

Private business partnering with research Universities is one reputable method of achieving this goal. It is a process. It takes time, it takes educating, and it requires patience from the beginning to the end. The process is something University researchers excel in and are prepared for the many hurdles, and oftentimes one that private business is not prepared for. Building teams and working together on realistic timelines, having a solid strategic plan in place, and recognizing funding amounts necessary to achieve study goals are all essential building blocks toward unbiased research. Doing so then allows the findings of studies to be reported and presented to all stakeholders in the highest and most professional manner possible.

Cannabis research is ripe for ideas, partnerships, sharing of findings, and product efficacy. Consumer demand will drive apportion of acceptance and reputable research will drive the rest!

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