

NATIONAL WA HEALTHCARE

Green progress: WA's first medicinal cannabis-specific clinic opens

By [Hamish Hastie](#)

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After years of self prescribing and seeking pain relief for her chronic condition on the black market Francesca James has warmly welcomed WA's first medicinal cannabis-centric doctors clinic, which opened Wednesday.

Ms James, 27, used to work full time, ride horses and go to university, but in 2013 that all came crashing down.



Francesca James, 27, at the Cannabis Access Clinic in Subiaco. HAMISH HASTIE

What first started as a dull pain in her shoulders eventually spread throughout her body until it got so bad she was sometimes forced to sit in a wheelchair.

She was diagnosed with chronic pain from psoriatic arthritis and was on a cocktail of pain-relieving drugs.

“The pain was like the feeling you get after you’ve finished the hardest workout you’ve ever done, but everywhere and everyday,” Ms James said.

“I went from being a full-time student and working full-time to being bed-ridden and in a wheelchair.

“The medication they put me on straight away made me worse. I was getting gut problems and stuff that I hadn’t gotten before because of it. I was getting no sleep and got up to 95 kg.

“I was being prescribed a cocktail of medications. Because of the opiates I got restless leg syndrome and because of that I got prescribed something to counteract that and then I was prescribed something else to counteract the side effects of the other drug.”

Eventually Ms James had enough of prescription medication and in her desperation sourced cannabis for pain relief on the black market.

“After I started using it it helped with my inflammation and I came off a lot of medications, I found the THC (an active chemical compound in marijuana) helps my sleep and pain significantly,” she said.

Ms James’ story is not unique and with growing public and regulatory acceptance of cannabis as a medicine doctors and businesses are finding new markets.

The Cannabis Access Clinic in Subiaco aims to streamline the access to medicinal cannabis with health professionals proficient in the area.

In WA medicinal cannabis products are considered unapproved controlled drugs and can only be prescribed with approval from the WA Department of Health and federal Therapeutic Goods Administration.

The drugs are not smoked, but rather come in oil and spray forms.

As of the end of November the Therapeutic Goods Administration had approved a total of 2339 applications for medicinal cannabis.

Dr Berenice Blakemore has been a GP for 18 years and started seeing the Cannabis Access Clinic’s first patients on Wednesday.

She said in her time as a GP she’d had countless patients inquiring about medicinal cannabis to treat their chronic pain symptoms and this clinic would be able to do it in a safe and transparent way.

“I’ve definitely had patients who have decided to try cannabis and source it from wherever but they don’t know what they’re getting they don’t know how pure the product is, and it’s expensive and still illegal,” Dr Blakemore said.

“Through us the patient is prescribed a guaranteed product, it’s pure and unadulterated which is different from maybe accessing supplies from somewhere else.

“It will become a natural process, you prescribe it, you tell them about possible side effects, outline the definite no-no’s like driving and pregnancy.”

TGA medicinal cannabis treatment approvals

Month (2018)	Number of medicinal cannabis approvals
January	60
February	37
March	54
April	89
May	132
June	146
July	188
August	231
September	238
October	329
November	568

Source: TGA

The clinic, which already has three locations on the east coast, charges an out-of-pocket \$200 fee for an initial consultation and only takes patients from referrals.

Dr Blakemore was careful to point out the clinic would not be dispensing any medicinal cannabis and there was still a rigorous process a patient needed to go through.

“GPs will refer suitable patients to us who have exhausted all their pain-relieving options and they come in for an initial consult,” she said.

“We go through the GP paperwork with them and what their expectations are and once they’ve had that initial consult a request for approval from the TGA is sent out and they usually get back to us within two weeks.”

Department of Health WA advice to GPs states there is still limited evidence of variable quality that supports the use of medicinal cannabis in selected conditions, but it is expanding.

An Australian Medical Association WA spokesman said they weren’t concerned with the clinic but reiterated the association’s position on medicinal cannabis that is had to be implemented in the health system slowly.

For Ms James the clinic couldn’t have come quick enough.

“It’s really exciting,” she said. “I’m sick of the stigma, I’m sick of the stereotyping and I don’t want to have to deal with criminals anymore to relieve my pain.”



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