A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF ILlicit DRUg USE IN PATIENTS WITH OR WITHOUT CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE Abuse IN INTERVENTIONAL PAIN MANAGEMENT

Laxmaiah Manchikanti, MD, Kim S. Damron, RN, Carla D. Beyer, RN, BSN, and Vidyasagar Pampati, MSc

The prevalence of illicit drug use by patients in a chronic pain management practice who concomitantly abuse prescription-controlled substances is not known. The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of illicit drug use by patients in an interventional pain management practice, based on whether or not there was evidence of simultaneous abuse of prescription drugs.

One hundred and fifty patients in an interventional pain management practice who were prescribed controlled substances for pain treatment were selected for assessment of concomitant illicit drug use by urine drug testing. Patients were divided into two groups: Group I consisted of 100 consecutive patients without evidence of controlled substance abuse and Group II consisted of 50 consecutive patients with documented abuse of prescription controlled substances. All patients underwent urine testing with the Rapid Drug Screen™ test. The test is a one-step, lateral flow immunoassay for the simultaneous detection of four illicit drugs (i.e., amphetamine, methamphetamine, marijuana, and cocaine).

Results showed a prevalence of illicit drug abuse in patients without a history of controlled substance abuse of 14%. In contrast, illicit drug abuse in patients with a history of controlled substance abuse was 34%. Marijuana was the drug of choice in both groups, with 22% in the prescription abuse group and 10% in the non-abuse group. The second most commonly used illicit drug in both groups was cocaine.

This study demonstrated a clinically significant use of illicit drugs, particularly marijuana and cocaine in an interventional pain management setting, in patients with or without evidence of concomitant abuse of prescription controlled substances.

Keywords: Drug abuse, illicit drugs, prescription controlled substances, controlled substance agreement, opioid abuse, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, Rapid Drug Screen

Illicit drug use in patients without a history of controlled substance abuse may occur in 16% of patients in an interventional pain practice setting (1). The 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (2) showed that in 2001, marijuana was used by 5.4% of the population and cocaine by 0.7% of the population, whereas 1.6% of the population used pain relievers for non-medical purposes and 0.6% of the population abused tranquilizers. An estimated 15.9 million Americans aged 12 years or older (7.1% of the population) used an illicit drug during the month immediately prior to the survey interview in 2001. The number of persons with substance dependence or abuse increased from 4.5 million (6.5% of the population) in 2000 to 16.6 million (7.3% of the population) in 2001 (2). In addition, between 2000 and 2001, the estimated number of persons needing treatment for an illicit drug problem increased from 4.7 million in 2000 to 6.1 million in 2001.

Marijuana was the most commonly used illicit drug in 2001, abused by 76% of current illicit drug users (2). In addition, 44% of illicit drug users in 2001 (7 million Americans) used drugs other than marijuana and hashish. Of the 7.0 million current users of illicit drugs other than marijuana, 4.8 million were concomitant users of psychotherapeutic drugs. Of those reporting use of any psychotherapeutic drug, 3.5 million abused pain relievers, 1.5 million tranquilizers, 1 million stimulants, and 300,000 sedatives. There were some reductions compared to 1997 data, though controlled substance use for non-medical purposes continues to be a significant problem (3).

It has also been shown that those who used prescription-type drugs non-medically in the previous year had a higher rate of other illicit drug use as well (4). Sixty-three percent of adolescents and young adults who used prescription-type drugs non-medically in the past year also used marijuana in the past year, compared with 17% of adolescents and young adults who had not abused prescription-type drugs in the past year (4). Consequently, it is expected that patients abusing controlled substances are more likely to concomitantly abuse illicit drugs.

The problem of marijuana use is complicated by recent evidence of its potential analgesic effects. Cannabinoids block pain in laboratory pain models and in some patients with cancer or non-cancer pain (5-7). Cannabinoids have been reported as effective against thermal, mechanical, and chemical pain, with a potency and efficacy comparable to opioids in models of acute pain (5). Further, cannabinoids have been shown to modulate inflammatory (6) and neuropathic pain (7). Reviews have described an endogenous cannabinoid system involved in pain modulation that produces analgesia through the same brain stem circuitry involved in opioid analgesia (the endogenous ligand anandamide) (5, 8-10). Moreover, independent of the opioid receptor, cannabinoid analgesia is produced with Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the major pharmaceutically active constituent of cannabis. It has been postulated that co-administration of a cannabinoid may lead to a lower opioid requirement (11, 12).

From Pain Management Center of Paducah, Paducah, Kentucky. Address Correspondence: Laxmaiah Manchikanti, MD, 2831 Lone Oak Road, Paducah, Kentucky 42003. E-mail: dmr@apex.net. Funding: No external Support was received in completion of this study.
Table 1. Illicit drug abuse in patients with or without history of prescription drug abuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group I (without controlled substance abuse)</th>
<th>Group II (with controlled substance abuse)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amphetamine</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Abuse</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>34%*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates significant difference

12). A medical marijuana access program established in Canada has reported on the medical properties of marijuana (11-13). These developments may increase the already common use of marijuana in the United States. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) considers marijuana a “gateway” to the world of illicit drug use. Among the reasons marijuana use is widespread includes a relaxed public perception of potential harm, popularization by the media, and advocates of legalization. However, use of marijuana is associated with serious complications and addiction. The deleterious effects of marijuana, used in conjunction with controlled substances, are not known.

Cocaine is the second most used illicit drug in the United States. Cocaine use is associated with severe medical complications. Cocaine has been shown to increase the likelihood of accidental death when used in combination with alcohol. However, its use in combination with controlled substances is not known. There is no medical value for cocaine, other than as a local anesthetic. Other commonly used illicit drugs include amphetamines and heroin.

There are no controlled studies evaluating illicit drug use in chronic pain patients who concomitantly abuse prescription drugs. Hence, this trial was undertaken to evaluate the prevalence of illicit drug abuse in patients with or without controlled substance abuse.

Methods

In an interventional pain management practice 150 consecutive patients receiving controlled substances, including opioids, were selected for testing for illicit drug use with an office-based urine drug test. Group I consisted of 100 patients without controlled drug abuse, whereas Group II consisted of 50 patients with evidence of abuse of controlled drugs. The presence of drug abuse was determined by history, physical examination, evidence of doctor shopping, other prescription drug abuse, unauthorized escalation of dosage, and appropriate clinical response to controlled substance medications (i.e., stable doses without evidence of drug dependence). Abuse was also defined as obtaining controlled substances from other physicians or other identifiable sources and/or violation of controlled substance agreements. All patients had a prior controlled substance agreement, and gave informed consent for the drug testing. The person obtaining the consent and the person performing the testing were different. The results were blinded to the evaluating author, statistician, the patient, and other members of the study group.

All tests were performed at the practice location utilizing the Rapid Drug Screen™ (American Biomeca Corporation, Kinderhook, New York). The test is a one-step, lateral flow immunoassay for the simultaneous detection of up to nine drugs by urine analysis. Each analysis occupies a separate channel in a test card. This is intended for use in the qualitative detection of the various drugs. Rapid Drug Screen™ is a competitive immunoassay, utilizing highly specific reactions between antibodies and antigens for the simultaneous detection of cocaine, opiates, amphetamines, cannabinoids, barbiturates, benzodiazepines, methamphetamine, phencyclidine, and tricyclic antidepressants in urine. The testing was performed to detect the four most commonly abused illicit drugs: marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, and amphetamine.

Data were collected using a preprinted format without patient identification. Following the collection of data, all patients who tested negative for controlled drug abuse were included in Group I. Group II consisted of all patients determined to have abused one or more prescription controlled drugs. Data were recorded in a database using Microsoft® Access®. The SPSS Version 9.0 statistical package was used to generate descriptive tables. Differences in proportions were tested using the Chi-square test. Fischer’s exact test was used wherever the expected value was less than five. Results were considered statistically significant if the P value was less than 0.05.

Results

One hundred patients in Group I and 50 patients in Group II were evaluated. All specimens were collected and were able to be tested for the presence or absence of four illicit drugs, i.e., amphetamine, methamphetamine, marijuana, and cocaine.

Table 1 shows the prevalence of illicit drug abuse in patients with or without a history of controlled substance abuse. Fourteen percent of patients in the non-abuse group (Group I) tested positive for illicit drugs, with 10% positive for marijuana (THC) and 4% for cocaine. In contrast, in Group II a total of 34% were positive for illicit drug use, with 22% positive for marijuana and 12% positive for cocaine. None of the patients in Group I or Group II tested positive for amphetamines or methamphetamines. There was no evidence of concomitant marijuana and cocaine use in this study. Overall abuse of illicit drugs and marijuana use was significantly higher in patients with controlled substance abuse compared to patients without controlled substance abuse (P=0.0095).

Discussion

This consecutive, double-blind, clinical evaluation showed a high prevalence of illicit drug use in patients with concomitant controlled substance abuse, with an overall prevalence of 34%. Twenty-two percent of patients tested positive for marijuana and 12% for cocaine. In patients without evidence of abuse of prescription drugs, 14% tested positive for illicit drugs, with 10% positive for marijuana and 4% for cocaine. Marijuana was the...
most commonly used illicit drug in both
groups. No combined use of illicit drugs
was seen in either group.

Marijuana is the most widely used
and readily available illicit drug in the
United States, with an estimated 11.5 mil-
lion current users. At least one-third of
the US population has used marijuana at
some time. The Drug Enforcement Ad-
ministration (DEA) (14) has suggested
numerous reasons that marijuana use is
widespread, including a relaxed public at-
titude regarding its potential harm, popular-
ization by the media and by groups ad-
vocating legalization, the current trend of
smoking marijuana-filled cigars known as
“blunts,” and the Internet. At the pres-
tent time, scores of websites provide in-
formation and links extolling the virtues
of marijuana. These sites provide forums
for user group discussion, posting of doc-
uments and messages for public discus-
sions, and advocate the legal sale of mari-
juana. Further, several websites advertise
the sale of marijuana and provide instruc-
tions on home cultivation (14). Mariju-
ana is a cash crop in many communities.
Lynskey et al (4) reported that an associa-
tion between early cannabis use and sub-
sequent drug use and abuse/dependence
arises from peer pressure and the social
context in which cannabis is obtained and
used. Approximately one-third of Amer-
icans support the legalization of marijua-
na (15). In addition, nearly 80% of the
U.S. population approves of marijuana for
medical purposes and believe that people
using marijuana recreationally should not
be fined or jailed (15). The general public
considers marijuana to be associated with
very low health risks (16).

Pharmacological evidence suggests
that exposure to cannabis induces sub-
tle biochemical changes that may encour-
age drug-taking behaviors (17). This hy-
pothesis is based on similarities between
the effects of marijuana and heroin on
opioid receptors (18). It also has been
shown that chronic exposure to marijua-
na induces cross-tolerance to opioids and
amphetamines (18, 19). Other proposed
mechanisms for increased marijuana use
include initial experiences with marijua-
na, which are frequently rated as pleasur-
able and encourage continued use of mar-
juana and broader drug experimentation
(20). Seemingly safe early experiences
with marijuana may reduce the perceived
risk of, and therefore barriers to, use of
other drugs. This may provide individu-
als with access to other drugs as they come
in contact with drug dealers (21) or sell-
ers of prescription-controlled substances.
The National Household Survey on Drug
Abuse (NHSDA) in 2001 (2) reported a
significant decline in the perceived risk
of marijuana coupled with an increased
awareness of its easy availability.

Furthermore, isolated scientific pub-
lications colliding with ideas about drug-
free environments, have shown cannabi-
noids to block pain response in laborato-
ry pain models and in some patients with
cancer or non-cancer pain (5-7). An en-
derogenous cannabinoid system involved
in pain modulation that produces analge-
sia through the same brain stem circuitry
involved in opioid analgesia also has de-
scribed (5, 8-10). This has led to the pos-
tulates that co-administration of a canna-
binoid may lead to a lower opioid require-
ment (11, 12). Medical marijuana access
program established in Canada (11-13)
has not helped the campaign for drug free
environment in the United States.

The National Household Survey on
Drug Abuse (2) showed that the initia-
tion of non-medical prescription type
drug abuse has been increasing, since the
mid-80s from about 400,000 new users to
2,000,000, a five-fold increase over a pe-
riod of 14 years. It was also shown that
those who used prescription drugs non-
medically in the past year had a higher
rate of other illicit drugs. Sixty-three per-
cent of adolescents and young adults who
used prescription drugs non-medically in
the past year also used marijuana in the
past year. In contrast, only 17% of adoles-
cents and young adults who had not used
prescription drugs non-medically in the
past year had used marijuana.

Cocaine is the second most com-
monly used illicit drug in the United
States. It is available as a white crystal,
powder, or as crack or rock cocaine (22).
Crack cocaine is usually smoked, where-
as powdered cocaine is snorted or dis-
solved in water and injected. About 10% of
Americans over the age of 12 have tried
cocaine in some form at least once, about
2% have tried crack, and nearly 1% of the
population uses cocaine on a regular basis
(22-24). Cocaine is a powerful, addictive
drug (25), with severe associated medical
complications, including chest pain, pul-
monary trauma, and bleeding (26). Con-
comitant use of cocaine with alcohol in-
creases the risk of accidental death (27).

Although there are extensive data on
the use of illicit drugs in the general popu-
lation, there are few data documenting use
of illicit drugs in patients taking prescrip-
tion controlled substances, such as anal-
egesics. Consequently, there are no theo-
ries predicting that abuse of prescription-
controlled substances increases the rate of
illicit drug use. This relationship has been
noted with marijuana and controlled sub-
stance usage, but not vice versa. How-
ever, the same mechanisms may apply. For
example, it has been shown that chronic
treatment with THC induces cross-toler-
ance to opioids in rats. Additionally, per-
ceptions about controlled substances may
be similar to those of marijuana, where
drug use is pleasurable and deemed to be
safe, because the drugs are prescribed
by physicians. Because of easy access,
patients with chronic pain syndromes
and associated psychological disorders,
such as depression or anxiety, may be at
risk of illicit drug abuse as well. Patients
see physicians for treatment of chronic pain
more than any other medical disor-
der. Further, patients taking prescription
drugs for chronic pain may obtain illicit
drugs for self-treatment purposes, includ-
ing pain relief, to facilitate sleep, to im-
prove appetite, and for pleasure. In the
present study, there was a correlation be-
tween controlled substance abuse and il-
licit drug use. While it remains to be seen
if prescription-controlled substance abuse
functions as a gateway to illicit drug use, it
is apparent that patients who abuse pre-
scription medications have a higher rate
of illicit drug use.

In addition to marijuana, cocaine
remains a significant threat to patient
health, with 4% of patients without con-
comitant prescription drug abuse using
cocaine, and 12% of patients with pre-
scription abuse using cocaine. This is in
contrast to a 0.7% to 1% prevalence of
cocaine use in the general population (2,
22-24).

Random drug testing may be per-
formed in many ways. Rapid Drug Screen
is performed easily and inexpensively.
This test utilizes a competitive immuno-
assay technique for the simultaneous de-
tection of multiple illicit substances. The
test device consists of a membrane strip
with an immobilized drug conjugate.
Quality control is provided with the test.
Qualitative detection thresholds for vari-
ous drugs are: amphetamines, 1,000 ng/
ml, cocaine 300 ng/ml, marijuana or can-
nabinoids 50 ng/mL. These screening
cut-off concentrations are recommended by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). For confirmation, a quantitative analytical method should be used. Further screening may use the DS-9 test (drug screen-9), which can be performed either by the enzyme-multiplied immunoassay technique (EMIT) or the fluorescent polarization immunoassay (FPIA).

Currently, physicians may choose not to obtain drug screens when patients adhere to a controlled substance agreement, have a clean report on doctor shopping, and do not obtain prescriptions outside the agreement. Such patients are considered not to have evidence of controlled substance abuse. For that reason, it would be expected that use of illicit drugs in this group would be absent or extremely low. However, this study challenges this assumption, because 14% of patients who did not appear to abuse prescription drugs used illicit drugs, and 34% of patients with evidence of prescription abuse used illicit drugs. These results are similar to our previous study (1).

Some have suggested that all patients undergo random urine drug testing for illicit drugs, irrespective of their prescription usage pattern (28-30). Based on the results of this study, this appears to be a reasonable course of action. However, this usually involves urine drug testing with tests such as the DS-9 test (drug screen-9), followed by OPGCMS (opiates by gas chromatography mass spectroscopy) for confirmation. Performing both tests is cumbersome, expensive, and, at times, impractical. The Rapid Drug Screen™ test, as utilized in this study, is inexpensive (around $6-$12 per test) and is easily performed in the physician's office.

Other questions raised by this study include potential consequences of identifying illicit drugs in patients who are receiving prescriptions for controlled substances, such as opioids. Each physician must establish a threshold level for his or her practice, and follow the policies appropriately. With marijuana, a key question is whether one may be somewhat lenient and give a patient several chances to abstain, as proven by subsequent random drug testing. With cocaine, the situation is different, and a zero-tolerance policy may be the established.

CONCLUSION

Based on this study, there appears to be a high rate of illicit drug use in an interventional pain management setting, with 34% of patients abusing prescription-controlled substances also using illicit drugs and 14% of patients without prescription drug abuse using illicit drugs. There was no evidence of amphetamine or methamphetamine use or combined use of marijuana and cocaine. Physicians must be vigilant and consider random testing of all patients on controlled substances for concomitant illicit drug use, including marijuana and cocaine.

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Author Affiliation:
Laxmaiah Manchikanti, MD
Medical Director
Pain Management Center of Paducah
2831 Lone Oak Road
Paducah, Kentucky 42003
E-mail: drm@apex.net

Kim S. Damron, RN
Clinical Coordinator
Ambulatory Surgery Center
2831 Lone Oak Road
Paducah, Kentucky 42003
E-mail: kim@paimmd.com

Carla D. Beyer, RN, BSN
Clinical Coordinator
Ambulatory Surgery Center
2831 Lone Oak Road
Paducah, Kentucky 42003
E-mail: carla@thepainmd.com

Vidyasagar Pampati, MSc
Statistician
Pain Management Center of Paducah
2831 Lone Oak Road
Paducah, Kentucky 42003
E-mail: sagar@painmd.com

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