The purpose of this project is to address long term frequent use of marijuana, its effects upon physical and mental health and dietary therapies for both the continuing user and recovering addict. For reasons I cannot fathom, I seem to be a “confessor” figure to an awful lot of people. I have spoken to no less than twenty individuals ranging in age from early 20’s to late 60’s who have discussed their long-term usage of marijuana and concerns about what it might be doing to their bodies and mental states. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse reported in 2001 that approximately 5.6 million people over the age of 12 in America had participated in drug use. Of those 3.6 million met criteria for dependence with 2 million of those people identifying marijuana or hashish as their drug of choice. Many of confessed users I spoke with told me they would not stop smoking or otherwise ingesting marijuana regardless of the effects on their health.

While marijuana is often referred to in many studies as a “gateway” drug leading to the use of more addictive drugs, this is not everyone’s experience. Many users, according to Marijuana Anonymous begin and end their drug use with marijuana and maintain their addiction at a consistent level rather than escalating it. Just saying no is no longer an option for this group of people. This information is in accord with the stories relayed to me by long-term users.

Difficulties in researching this information
Until about 1930 there seemed to be no stigma attached to usage of hemp and cannabis in the United States. Many cultures considered it an excellent medicine and a shamanic tool. In our culture of excess, however, there is a tremendous amount of mixed press regarding the topic of marijuana. Anti-marijuana crusaders, beginning with Harry Anslinger, America’s first crusader in the War on Drugs, demonize hemp in general and marijuana (Cannabis sativa and Cannabis indica) claiming outrageous pseudo-facts which change from decade to decade. Marijuana advocates publish equally outrageous pseudo-facts touting the uses and safety of marijuana usage both medicinally and recreationally. Good information is available however, and analyzing symptoms from a TCM standpoint has proven useful in determining helpful dietary treatments for persons with long-standing marijuana habits.

Disclaimer
I make no claims as to expertise on this topic, nor do I have training in addiction therapy. I do not present this material in an attitude of helping an individual “manage their addictions.” Instead, I seek the benefit of my future clients and contacts, encouraging those I treat to consistently seek better health by taking gradual and consistent steps toward better health.

It has been my personal experience that taking even a small interest in one’s own health and increasing one’s personal awareness leads to further progress. While the best health would undoubtedly be found in the cessation of marijuana usage, people in between usage and renunciation need assistance with this journey without judgment or lecturing. Kindness and a genuine desire for the overall health of my future patients is, I believe, the best way I can help: people are not motivated to improve their health by being forced, nagged or prodded.
Physiological results of long term use

The TCM Properties of Marijuana

Some Chinese medicine practitioners describe marijuana’s properties as hot and dry, citing its Chinese name, Huo Ma which has been translated as “Fire Hemp” suggesting an overall Yang nature. Other experts describe marijuana as Yin drug, citing its historical use for release of anxiety and treatment of pain. The effects of both are evident.

While there is no hard core research on this aspect of marijuana use, anecdotal evidence suggests that shortly after ingestion either by smoking or eating, a person with a greater measure of Yin tends to become more sluggish, appetite is enhanced, and thoughts become expansive and creative. A person of whom Yang is a more characteristic trait is able to function on a physical level while “stoned,” and is less likely to overeat. Excess Yang traits become suppressed in the short term and anxiety is reduced. (Your results may vary!) Long term effects of both smoking and eating marijuana cause very similar organ dysfunctions in all Zang organs.

Affects on the Lung

Marijuana negatively impacts the Lung Yin, Qi and the thin Body Fluids, an affect more pronounced when it is smoked. This impairs the Lung’s ability to disperse fluids as well as the smooth flow of Wei Qi. Marijuana smokers experience a dry, unproductive cough, “cotton-mouth” and a dry burning throat. The suppression of the dispersion role of the Lung and thus of Wei Qi leads to the immunosuppressive effects of long-term smoking. There is also a rise in blood pressure associated with smoking pot which can be attributed to disturbance of both Heart (impairing the Heart Qi) and Lung functions (Lung’s role as the controller of the vessels).

Long term habitual marijuana usage can manifest in dry skin and a persistent cough as Invasion of the Lung by Dryness damages and depletes the Lung Yin. Users have also reported basic Yin deficiency symptoms such as night sweating and five palm heat. In A Handbook of Clinical Case Histories Ye Tianshi said, “The lung has an innate aversion to cold, to heat, to dryness, to dampness, and most of all, to fire and wind. In the presence of these kinds of pernicious influences the lung easily loses its clear and crisp equilibrium; it will be inhibited in its function to descend and command, and as a result of this, normally free flowing qi will become obstructed and stagnate.”

Liver

Red eyes, a rise in blood pressure (Liver Yang Rising), expansive thoughts and planning without follow-through (indicative of over stimulation of Liver Qi) are all reported by marijuana users. Additionally, many users relate the feeling of being able to feel energy flowing through their system, especially in the trunk of the body, indicative of stimulation in Liver Qi. One of the effects marijuana users like about the drug is the expansiveness of consciousness. There is a feeling of connecting to the universe in ways not normally accessible in non-smoking reality. This suggests that the Hun, which resides in the Liver and is an ethereal type of consciousness, is super-activated by marijuana’s effect upon the Liver.

In the long term, however, this stimulation leads Liver Qi stagnation, Liver heat, and Liver wind. A deficiency in Liver Yin and Liver Blood produces symptoms such as dry eyes, dry throat and mouth, and night sweats. Liver Qi stagnation can also affect the digestive system, causing a
deficiency of Spleen Qi as Liver overacts on Spleen which can be experienced as a drop in appetite while not ingesting marijuana.

Stomach and Spleen

“Munchies” are a classic symptom of pot smoking, occurring within an hour of ingestion. Marijuana smokers also experience a desire for cold liquids. While a desire for cold beverages is partially to counteract dry mouth and throat, both this symptom and increased appetite can also be indicative of fire affecting the Stomach. The latter affect applies whether marijuana is eaten or smoked further suggesting the connection between the drug itself (as opposed to the heat of the smoke) and Stomach fire.

Over the long haul, the excess fire created in the Stomach then dries up the fluids creating a condition incompatible with the Stomach’s ability to function: dryness. This further propels the desire for cold drinks and compromises the Spleen’s ability to support the Brain, organs and the musculature, possibly the result of the heavy feeling many people report in their limbs and confused thinking after smoking. Additionally, impaired ability to take in nutrients and create Acquired Essence negatively impacts the body’s Jing Essence.

Heart and Vessels

Rise in blood pressure, red eyes, excessive laughter and short term memory loss are all symptoms which are associated with Heart. Contemplations by the Huainan Masters (Huainanzi) says, “The heart is the ruler of the five organ networks. It commands the movements of the four extremities, it circulates the qi and the blood, it roams the realms of the material and the immaterial, and it is in tune with the gateways of every action.” Impairment of these functions would help to explain the lethargy in the muscles and inability to function that many users experience when smoking. Because of the hot nature of marijuana, the blood is warmed causing an elevation in heart rate. The effect of the elevation in blood pressure and the heat in the blood can also contribute to the redness of the eyes.

Because the Heart houses the Shen, disturbance of the Heart results in impairment of sensory input related to long term pot smoking. Disturbance of the Heart and Blood also result in short term memory loss, an effect which carries over into life when not stoned.

Kidney

Melatonin, a hormone produced by the pineal gland, reduces stress, increase immunity, deepens sleep and promotes longevity. Though melatonin is produced in the brain, the raw materials needed for melatonin are provided by the kidney and adrenal glands. Marijuana increases the levels of melatonin temporarily and artificially, drawing heavily upon the kidney and adrenals resulting in adrenal stress. In TCM terms, repeated performances of melatonin stimulation can result in Kidney Yin Xu, Kidney Yang Xu, and a deficiency of Jing Essence. Paul Pitchford says, “When Kidney Yin … is deficient, the heart, mind and Brain yin (hormones and chemicals) also become deficient…” The depletion of the Lung, Heart, and Liver Yin also impact the Kidney which works to make up the deficit with its own resources. Because so many Kidney resources are impacted, the Jing is heavily impacted and depleted as well. Pitchford says that drug highs deplete large chunks of Jing with each use. This can result in loss of marrow including both bone and brain marrow as well as impacting over all health.
Supporting this view, Ayurvedic theory states that intoxicants damage the liver and brain cells. Western studies have noted cerebral atrophy and widening of synaptic clefts in the brain as well as disintegration of brain and nerve cells. Deposits of “inclusion bodies” in the nuclei of brain cells have also been noted. Western medicine has also identified marijuana as a calcium inhibitor. Calcium is needed for bone health and for smooth movement of muscles, both voluntary and involuntary. Pitchford defines calcium as cooling, relaxing to the Liver, calming, moistening to the Lung, beneficial to the nerves and heart. This suggests that the calcium depletion (and the resultant mobilization of calcium from the bones) coupled with Jing depletion could thus result in bone loss long term, significantly contributing to osteoporosis.

**Treatment options**

Please bear in mind that one of the challenges of treating a marijuana user is the law and the ability of the state and federal authorities to subpoena written patient records. All practitioners should be aware of this and exercise caution in order to protect patients and themselves. You may never have a patient that will confess to marijuana usage…but friends and family are likely to.

With all of this scary information in mind, it might seem a little insane to craft a diet to support the body that continues to smoke or otherwise consume marijuana. But there is no healing without compassion and meeting people where they are. People grow and change when they are ready to do so. My goal is not to support addictive behavior in order that a patient can “manage” and addiction, but to provide a safe space in which to encourage healing. I will repeat again that it has been my experience that any time I raise my awareness of my health or take steps to improve my health it leads to further steps. It may be that the first and best step a patient can take is to practice Qigong in order to experience stress release and movement of Qi without the aid of external substances. Encourage your patients to proceed at their own pace, progressing at their own speed.

Further, encouraging your patients, friends, or family members to incorporate healing foods in their diets will minimize the impact of long term smoking. As usual, take the individual’s particular symptoms, differential diagnosis and constitution into mind when crafting healthful foods.

**Herbs**

There are several herbal formulas on the market geared toward consistent marijuana users (HDP-9 and Balance the Herb, for instance). Other specific herbs which can be of use are calamus root and chapparal.

Calamus root (*Acorus calamus*) is an herb which helps to restore mental damage from substance abuse. One ounce of dry calamus root (or 2 oz if fresh) can be decocted in 1 ½ pint of water for 1 hour then strained and consumed. However this is very bitter. It might be better to take 3g TID between meals. It can also be made into a tincture and taken 20 drops BID sublingually.

Chapparal is a western herb which is consumed whole or in an alcohol tincture. It too is very bitter, so the better dosage might be 1 heaping teaspoon in warm water. This herb is best taken once per day for 20 days with a one week break and then again for another 20 days. This herb is detoxifying and tends to be a little harsh. It would be best to save this one for someone who is quitting smoking after lengthy use.
There are 3 further herbal therapies recommended in the Pitchford book ranging from aggressive to moderate to mild.\(^{18}\)

1) The aggressive therapy is recommended for strong people with excess conditions such as infections, Liver stagnation and signs of full heat. It consists of golden seal and cayenne in equal parts.

2) The moderate therapy consists of 2 parts golden seal, 2 parts mullein, 2 parts marshmallow root, 1 part chen pi, and 1 part spearmint. These herbs are taken powdered. They detoxify the Liver, reducing stagnation and dampness. They also moisten the Lung and Kidney yin to reduce stress, clear obstructions in the body, cleanse the Lung and lymphatic system, calm the mind, soothe the digestion, and open the consciousness.

3) The mildest therapy is Free and Easy Wanderer, also known as Xiao Yao San or Bupleurum Sedative Pills. Xiao Yao San overcomes Liver stress and stagnation, relaxes the nerves, soothes the emotions, detoxifies poisons, increases circulation, builds the blood, increases digestion, increases Qi movement, and calms the mind.

Calcium supplementation

As marijuana is a calcium blocker, it is important to supplement calcium, not just through supplements but through dietary modifications as well. This is especially true of the patient who is not ready to quit marijuana usage. To boost calcium absorption:

1. Get out in the sunshine for 20 or so minutes per day and/or use full spectrum indoor lighting.
2. Eat foods rich in calcium, magnesium (which is vital for calcium uptake), chlorophyll and mineral rich foods like whole grains, legumes, leafy greens, cereal grasses such as alfalfa, and micro algae.
3. Watch for foods and substances that are calcium inhibitors and avoid them if possible.
4. Do weight bearing exercise such as walking to stop calcium release from the bones and increase bone mass.
5. If calcium supplements are used, they should be of whole food quality such as alfalfa and kelp tablets.
6. Presoak grains and legumes before cooking. This neutralizes the phytic acid in these foods which bind with zinc, magnesium, and calcium.
7. Limit foods high in oxalic acid which binds with calcium. Some examples of oxalic acid foods are rhubarb, cranberries, plums, spinach, chard, and beet greens.
8. If you must have dairy, use fermented dairy such as yogurts, cottage cheese, buttermilk, and kefir. Goat milk is a better choice than cow milk.
9. If the patient has concurrent signs of Kidney deficiency, use Kidney tonics.

Replenishing soups are an excellent choice for both calcium replenishment and ease of digestion. Barley sprout and kale soup, simmered for 10 minutes is one choice, as is a soup of beans with seaweed. Broken bone soup, especially with fish is the most tonifying for both Kidney and calcium replenishing.\(^{19}\)

Diet

Pitchford recommends 3 regenerative diets which are in the cancer section, but which are useful for rebuilding cells, tissues and energies which have been damaged by the toxic nature of marijuana and other strong intoxicants. Diets can take up to 2 years after a patient stops ingesting toxins to heal the body.\(^{20}\)
1. Gentle diet recommended for weak, anemic, cold and deficient persons. This diet consists mainly of cooked grains (45%), cooked vegetables (35%) and the remainder a combination of fruit, beans, and other recommended foods.

2. Moderate diet recommended for patients with a strong pulse, no loose stools and no cold signs. This diet relies more heavily on fruits and juices, sprouted grains, legumes and seeds, cooked greens and other recommended foods. This detoxifies the body more quickly than the gentle diet.

3. To really speed things along, the aggressive diet rapidly eliminates toxins for people with signs of excess such as constipation, strength, and thick tongue coats. This diet has more raw foods and wheat grass.

Marijuana usage can cause simultaneous excesses and deficiencies. This must be taken into account when assessing individual constitutions and diagnoses and dietary changes for better health.

Jing Essence

It is vital to emphasize that the Jing-essence must be nourished due to the rate at which intoxicants such as marijuana devour it. Before the Jing can accept nourishment, however, the health of the Spleen and Liver must be assessed and boosted if needed before the Jing can accept nourishment. Once Spleen and Liver health have been secured, use foods such as micro-algae, Solomon’s seal, almonds, milk, ghee (clarified butter), nettles, royal jelly, bee pollen, and appropriate herbs for the patient’s constitution to nourish the essence. Jing tonics can be given in addition to diet.

Finally, encourage your patient’s to engage in spiritual practices such as Qigong, Tai’chi, and Yoga to give energy to the spirit, move the Qi, and release stress. Learning to move the Qi and de-stress without drug involvement will empower your patients toward self-care and better health.
End Notes

2. www.ma-online.org
This is drawn from online stories and anecdotal evidence.
8. Ibid.
    http://www.itmonline.org/5organs/lung.htm
15. Ibid, pg 430.
17. Pitchford, pg 217.
19. Pitchford, pg 220.