Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma
Cannabis as a Complementary Therapy

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Pam Haley was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma (NHL) three years ago.

NHL is a blood cancer that begins in the lymphatic system, an important part of the body’s immune system. Tumors form when too many lymphocytes — a type of white blood cells found all over the body in the bone marrow, lymph nodes, spleen and other areas with lymphatic tissue — are produced.

Like many with NHL, her symptoms were initially misdiagnosed. Her form of the disease was a slow-growing cancer that was difficult to detect until it had spread throughout her body and was in an advanced state. In 2004, she was told by her primary care physician that a lump in her groin was a hernia. Prior to that an ear-nose-and-throat doctor examined a biopsy of a lump on her neck and told her that that was probably an infection from a cat scratch. In 2010, she was again told that she had a hernia, this time by an urgent care physician. This lump was so large that she was rushed into emergency surgery. She woke up to find that she had never had a hernia and that what she had had all along were swollen lymph nodes. Her surgeon made her promise that she would see an oncologist immediately. The misdiagnoses had delayed appropriate treatment of her lymphoma until it had advanced to stage 4 cancer. Her oncologist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Washington recommended immediate and intense chemotherapy for six months followed by two rounds of radiation and then four years of maintenance chemotherapy.

The news was devastating. Haley wanted to treat her condition with natural medicine, but the disease is serious and her condition was advanced. She was confused because she did not have a family history of lymphoma. Her oncologist told her that the mutation that eventually led to the cancer was most likely caused by an environmental toxin, and that studies point to a link between NHL and pollutants.

The initial chemotherapy, R-CHOP, was brutal. She vomited non-stop for 72 hours after each session and wasn’t able to keep food down. Her hair fell out and she lost 20 pounds. A long-time recreational user, she tried smoking marijuana to calm her stomach and boost her appetite but
could not stand the smell. She did not have much luck with edibles either because she could not even tolerate the smell of cannabis in canna butter.

“Even a puff would make me nauseous because of the smell,” she said. “For two years while I was going through the chemo, I could not smoke it.”

Chemotherapy beat back her cancer, but she was weak and exhausted. For natural therapy, she visited Bastyr University’s School of Naturopathic Medicine near Seattle. The naturopaths at Bastyr sometimes with some cancers such as some breast cancers will use plant-based infusions alongside the chemotherapy given at oncology centers. A firm believer in the benefits of cannabis medicine, Haley asked about taking a concentrated cannabis oil along with her R-CHOP to help fight her disease.

She had heard about the positive influence of concentrated oil in treating several types of cancer. Michelle Sexton, her naturopathic doctor, agreed that cannabis oil used in conjunction with her chemotherapy might be beneficial. When Haley tried it, however, the shock of chemo combined with the powerful cannabis concentrate was too much. Even with the bland diet that she was following, she had trouble keeping anything down.

“My case was so bad that my naturopath put me on a program where I’d do the aggressive chemotherapy and radiation at Fred Hutchinson first before they’d try to rebuild my immune system,” she said. “Because my stom-

ach could not handle the cannabis oil while in the heavy chemo, she advised that I try it afterwards as part of a program to maintain a cancer-free state.”

Having endured aggressive chemotherapy and radiation, Haley, 44, is in the maintenance phase of her recovery. Every three months she receives an infusion of Rituxan, a patented concoction of monoclonal antibodies that go after B cells, which are a type of white blood cells. She is in her second year of the four-year infusion program.

In their normal state, B cells help to protect the body against germs by making antibodies that fight bacteria and viruses. While the chemotherapy might save her life, it has crushed her immune system and left her unable to fight infection. A recent sinus infection lingered for almost a year and sapped her energy.

Sexton gives Haley natural medicine and guidance.

“They might not cure the cancer, but through nutrition they can make the body stronger and less reliant on pharmaceuticals,” Haley said. “The chemo kills off normal flora bacteria that aid digestion. The goal is to rebuild my immune and digestive systems so that I will not need to go back to the chemotherapy when this is over.”

With her oncologist’s treatment protocol, she receives a CAT scan once a year and a PET scan every three years. The CAT scan is an imaging method that uses x-rays to create cross-sectional computerized pictures of specific areas within the body. The PET scan is an imaging test that uses a radioactive substance called a tracer to identify metabolic information within the body. To combat toxins from these tests, Sexton puts her on an herbal regimen before the scans to prepare her system and after the scans to flush her system of contrast fluids.

Whole Plant Therapy

Now that Haley is feeling better, her cancer-fighting arsenal includes cannabis in combination with her primary therapies.

“I absolutely use cannabis,” she said.

Throughout the ordeal she has suffered with overwhelming anxiety, which cannabis alleviates.

“The thing about cancer is that you feel so incredibly alone and isolated,” she said. “You need your family and

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friends but sometimes they leave you alone because they think you need space. You do need space, but you also need emotional support from family and friends. When feelings of depression, anxiety and helplessness are taking over, one toke can relieve not just the anxiety but all of the associated issues such as insomnia, irritable bowel syndrome and not being able to eat.”

Depending on her schedule, Haley might smoke cannabis or eat cannabis-infused food. For quick relief, she smokes. When she plans on working all day and needs energy she chooses edibles.

“With smoking you will not get as much of the benefit from the terpenes and cannabinoids as you will when you eat it,” she said. “You do have to be very careful though, because the THC content in a canna-butter might be high. This is very much like a pharmaceutical. You need to know what you are taking so that your medications do not contradict each other.”

Haley is a member of a collective garden where much of the cannabis and infused butter available to members is lab-tested for content and potency. She uses the test information to find appropriate medicine.

“When I was suffering with my sinuses I was really low on energy and so I was looking for a strain with high THC in the 16- to 20-percent range and low CBN,” she said. “Just a little, tiny bit of that really helped me with the energy and at that same time took away the worry that the cancer might be coming back.”

Both the disease and the chemotherapy left her body with inflammation issues. She is starting to recondition with yoga, but the swelling causes pain. Prior to exercise, she finds relief with cannabis-infused salves. Her collective offers a salve made with Dr. Bonner’s coconut oil. She said that the salve can be used as a massage oil or rubbed on after a shower for full-body relief. Studies have shown that the anti-inflammatory properties of cannabinoids kick in as infused salves and oils are absorbed through the skin, helping people with burns and other injuries, rheumatoid arthritis and even lupus.

“Patients tell us that it’s perfect with eczema too,” she said. “Just rubbing the affected area with the salve will provide an enormous benefit.”

Cannabis Oil

Despite earlier difficulty with cannabis oil, which initially made her too drowsy in addition to being tough on her sensitive stomach, she wanted to incorporate it into her maintenance regimen.

When her energy levels began improving, Haley found a concentrated cannabis oil that agreed with her system. The concentrate, which is made with 190-proof Everclear grain alcohol, is sticky and has the consistency of tar. Haley measures a milliliter dose, rolls it in sugar and swallows it like a pill.

“People try to suck on it to get it under their tongues for fast absorption, but so many have trouble doing this because it gets stuck in their teeth,” she said. “I just swallow it whole with some water.”

Haley advises that cannabis oils should be tested at a reputable lab. She tested one preparation that is made by a well-known Washington producer and marketed in attractive packaging and found that it contained extremely high levels of carcinogenic residuals.

One cannabis oil touted on youtube is made with naphtha, an aromatic distillation product found in industrial cleaning solvents and some lighter fluids. It is used as a blending component in gasoline production and might not be too healthy for cancer patients vulnerable to environmental toxins. Avoid toxic preparations and focus on natural therapy! Cannabis oil can be made with natural food-grade glycerin.

In California, a cannabis oil is made with a blend of Indica and Sativa strains by a chemist at the WoMen’s Alliance for Medical Marijuana (WAMM), a patients and caregivers collective in Santa Cruz, California. The cannabis grown at the collective is used to make the extraction, which WAMM has named Milagro Oil. WAMM’s Milagro Oil is also made with Everclear grain alcohol instead of naphtha.

Valerie Leveroni Corral, WAMM director and co-founder, doesn’t make any specific claims about the oil. An epileptic, she experienced as many as five grand mal seizures a day, with loss of consciousness and violent muscle contractions, before she began smoking cannabis. She’s been growing cannabis for her own illness for 38 years. She has
Some people are using cannabis oils like snake oil to make money, and there can be a lot of toxicity with naphtha.

been collecting data for almost two decades, and holds records from patients stating that concentrated cannabis oils help with pain and nausea.

WAMM is the longest running medical marijuana collective in the United States, and Corral believes strongly in using organic methods in combination with a holistic approach to healing.

“Some people are using cannabis oils like snake oil to make money, and there can be a lot of toxicity with naphtha” said Corral. “These are important things to raise questions about.”

Donald Abrams, M.D., chief of Hematology and Oncology at San Francisco General Hospital spoke at Patients Out of Time’s Seventh National Clinical Conference on Cannabis Therapeutics in Tucson, Arizona in 2012.

In addition to his work at San Francisco General, Dr. Abrams is also a cancer and integrative medicine specialist at the University of California, San Francisco, Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, where he provides integrative medicine consultations for cancer patients and has completed research in complementary and alternative therapies including mind-body treatments, botanical therapies, medical use of marijuana and traditional Chinese medicine herbal therapies.

At Patients Out of Time's conference, he spoke about cannabis therapy as a complement to conventional care. His patient research indicates that cannabinoids have anti-inflammatory effects, are effective in preclinical models of neuropathic pain, and can stimulate the appetite. His randomized controlled trials have shown that smoked cannabis is an effective treatment in patients with painful HIV-related peripheral neuropathy.

Dr. Abrams advised against putting too much faith in online videos that promote cannabis oil as a cancer cure. He gave as an example a Hodgkin’s patient who lost precious time self-medicating with cannabis oil when a proven chemo regimen could have prevented what occurred, which was cancer racing through his body to the point where he could not regain lost ground. Abrams said that it saddened him to see people betting on unproven science.

“Cannabis may be a good adjunct, but not a cure,” he said. “I don’t think that we can claim that these things cure cancer. We want to say that we are integrating things that complement conventional therapy.”

**Herbal Healing at a Cannabis Farmers’ Market**

Each Saturday, Haley can be found at the MMJ Universe Farmers’ Market, a cannabis farmers’ market in Black Diamond, Washington. Her table features an assortment of edible treats and several strains of cannabis flowers. She is happy to share her experiences with cancer and cannabis.

Haley is still undergoing chemotherapy, but she feels that she is on the road to recovery. A bone biopsy one year after her last radiation treatment was free of cancer cells, a sign that she is moving toward remission. She is grateful for the care that she has received at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Bastyr University’s School of Naturopathic Medicine.

“The doctors, nurses and caregivers in these facilities are saving lives,” she said. “They are giving back quality of life to cancer survivors.”