

Seniors cast aside stereotypes, find relief in medical marijuana

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Barbara Kaiser grinds up marijuana at home for use in a vaporizer, which is at right.

Kim Smith / Green Valley News

Part 1 of 2

Read Part 2: Meet a medical marijuana coach

Last Christmas, Barbara Kaiser slid to her kitchen floor and just sobbed.

The 82-year-old Green Valley woman had spent decades baking hundreds of

cookies for her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren for the holidays, but this year, the pain won. She just couldn't do it anymore.

Her arthritis and chronic neuropathy were so bad it took her 15 minutes to get out of a chair. She couldn't stand upright and needed a walker just to hobble a few feet.

She couldn't sleep more than two hours at a time.

"I wasn't suicidal, but I started wondering why I was waking up every day. Why did I bother? The pain was just amazing," Kaiser said.

Fast forward seven months and she's no longer using her walker for short distances, she's back to baking cookies and making dinner, and she's cut her daily Oxycontin intake by one-third. She's also sleeping through the night.

What happened?

Medical marijuana.

"It's incredible and I want people to know about it," Kaiser said during a recent interview at her home. "I'm a perfect example of what it can do."

Kaiser is among a growing number of older residents in Arizona turning to medical marijuana to deal with issues including chronic pain, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, cancer and more.

Just over 132,000 Arizona residents have medical marijuana cards; more than 18,000 are in Pima County, according to the Arizona Department of Health Services.

According to the state, roughly 22 percent of current card holders are 61 and older, up from the roughly 13 percent who held cards in 2011.

Kaiser is one of 1,300 people 81 years and older who hold a card in Arizona.

Tentative at first

Once an avid hiker, Kaiser developed a host of chronic health issues over the years and survived a bout with malignant lymphoma. She's been through chemotherapy, back surgery, knee surgery and has had too many epidural steroid injections to count.

For years, her doctor urged her to look into medical marijuana, but Kaiser and her husband, Walter, 88, were dead set against it. First, the federal government doesn't distinguish between illegal recreational marijuana and medical marijuana.

Second, they feared it would be too expensive.

Her quality of life got so bad, though, that in February Kaiser and her husband decided she ought to give medical marijuana a try. Unsure how to get a medical marijuana card, Walter spent several days on the Internet before finding a Tucson dispensary that put them on the right path.

The Kaisers found the application process lengthy and involved and they made some missteps, but she finally received her card March 30.

“I was excited and scared,” Kaiser said. “I was very frightened about the whole thing.”

But she was thrilled to find out there is a medical marijuana dispensary in Sahuarita, less than four miles from her home.

The staff at Hana Meds introduced her to a “medical cannabis coach” who has been working with her to find just the right strain of marijuana to relieve her symptoms, Kaiser said. (See related story.)

Dan Fernandez, general manager of Hana Meds, said they have about 2,000 active patients, the vast majority in the Green Valley area. The average age of their clients is around 60, their oldest is 94.

Learning about it

Like Kaiser, many of their patients are first-time users who don’t know about the different chemical compounds in marijuana, the different strains of marijuana and the various ways it can be consumed, Fernandez said. Nor do they know the benefits and pitfalls of each.

David Lamb, a patient consultant at Hana, said he and his colleagues are specially trained on such things as cannabinoids (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). They know which strains will cause which effects and can recommend how the product should be ingested.

Hana’s patient consultants direct patients to products and ingestion methods based on their medical conditions and symptoms, Lamb said. They don’t make diagnoses.

“A good analogy would be like antibiotics, there’s hundreds of different antibiotics and each one can affect a different condition or infection differently, so certain people need certain ones to address a certain condition,” Lamb said. “Marijuana can be much the same way. The reason there are so many different strains is because they can all interact even in very small or very great margins (and) can react very differently depending upon the patient and their needs.”

Medicinal marijuana patients can smoke joints, use a pipe, use vape pens — which are similar to eCigarettes — place drops under their tongue or purchase marijuana-infused edible products such as honey, brownies, gummie bears or cookies, Lamb said. Some dispensaries sell marijuana-infused coffee filters, soft drinks and ice cream.

The right dosage

Kaiser didn't get any relief after using drops so she tried marijuana-infused gummies. When she didn't notice any effects from the first one, she tried a second and then a third.

"By the third one, Walter had to be put me to bed," Kaiser said with a laugh. "I said this isn't going to work. I need to be able to function."

Although she felt fine the next day, that third gummie made her clammy and she felt as though her head was swelling.

Undeterred, Kaiser went back to Hana, and Lamb introduced her to a coach, who took her marijuana, infused it with coconut oil and put it into a capsule. She took her first one April 27.

"I was able to give up my walker the following week," Kaiser said. "I still use it to go shopping or if I'm going someplace where I have to walk a lot, but I don't need it at home anymore."

Since then, Kaiser said she has been trying different strains of marijuana and keeping a meticulous log detailing when she takes her capsules, when she began feeling its effects, what the effects were and how long they lasted. She does the same thing when she inhales from her vaporizer; she takes two puffs a few times a day.

She's already cut down on her Oxycontin and she hopes to one day be able to give it up completely, along with her neuropathy medicine.

It's important for patients to find a reputable dispensary with good staff to help you navigate, Lamb said. Kaiser's experience with the gummies is common; dosages are tricky when it comes to edibles.

Lamb starts his patients out with a small dosage of marijuana. He's heard of patients, particularly older ones, who never try marijuana again after a bad first experience.

"We slowly work toward the goal," Lamb said. "We don't try to get someone

stoned off the bat because it may be way too much for them, way too potent for them and it's going to be a frightening experience if it's too powerful. But it's all in your head, there's nothing bad happening in your body."

While some remain skeptical of the benefits of marijuana, Lamb said people should keep an open mind.

"If you've got cancer, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, different things like that, you've got pain, seizures and other things going on. How much of that is stress and anxiety?" Lamb asked. "If you can relieve stress and anxiety, dealing with pain becomes an issue that is much easier to address. What I'm getting at here is, if you could harmlessly and benignly reduce the stress and anxiety that comes with these serious illnesses, you've fought half the battle right there."

Plenty of research

Tom Salow, a branch chief for the licensing division of the Arizona Department of Health Services, said people ought to research medical marijuana dispensaries like they do any other business. They should talk to their friends and family about customer service and pricing.

DHS inspects each dispensary twice a year to ensure they are keeping track of their inventory and are labeling items correctly but the inspection results are not public record.

There also is no state oversight when it comes to the product itself, Salow said. No one is making sure the marijuana product has the advertised levels of THC or CBD or that dispensaries are selling patients the strain they've paid for.

"We recommend people do their due diligence before making a purchase," Salow said.

Kaiser still wakes up with pain, but, "I say to myself every morning to stop and think about what my pain was like before."

Back then, Kaiser said she hurt from the top of her neck to her toes.

"I couldn't even comb my hair, I felt useless," she said.

Her children have been supportive and were thrilled to see her at a family reunion in Chicago in June, Kaiser said.

"I didn't think I'd be able to go back in March," Kaiser said. "I didn't think I'd be able to sit on a plane that long."

She spent a little over \$150 last month on marijuana, but it was well worth it, Kaiser said. She hopes it will one day be covered by insurance.

“If it’s doing me more good than Oxycontin, which is covered by insurance, then I don’t know why insurance shouldn’t pay for it,” she said.

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