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Southlanders reluctant to ask for medicinal cannabis

Health

Louisa Steyl

At least 77 Southlanders used medicinal cannabis on prescription in the first half of the year, government data shows, and most are treating chronic pain.

Southland has few medicinal cannabis users, representing just 2 per cent of the 1842 prescriptions nationwide.

Otago patients, in comparison, make up 6 per cent of the national total.

The data shows an 84 per cent jump in the number of prescriptions from January to July, from 1002 to 1842.

Almost half of the Southlanders using the drug (45 per cent or about 34 patients) do so for chronic pain, 11 per cent use it for mental health conditions, 19 per cent for sleep, 8 per cent for digestion, 5 per cent for neurological issues, 4 per cent for cancer and 1 per cent for skin complaints.

Nationally, most users were aged between 20 and 50.

Southern District Health Board spokesperson Melissa Garry said the increase in prescriptions could be down to the introduction of the Medicinal Cannabis Scheme in April, which was designed to remove barriers and improve access.

Government regulations stipulate that the Government must be notified of every medicinal cannabis prescription, under the Misuse of Drugs Act and Medicines Act.

Doctors from the Auckland-based Cannabis Clinic have been studying patient data to understand why patients seek more information about medical cannabis.

Clinic spokesperson Dr Waseem Alzاهر said it was a popular belief that medicinal cannabis was primarily used by cancer patients to manage symptoms, but this wasn't correct.

After reviewing thousands of applications, the clinic found that cancer patients made up only 2 per cent of prescriptions, he said.

"What is not commonly understood is that there is a significant level of stigma associated with medicinal cannabis to the point that we have referrals from other GPs who want to help their patients but do not want to be seen prescribing it for them," Alzاهر said.

He was concerned that those who found relief for mental health issues using medicinal cannabis had to deal with the additional stress the stigma created.

The results of the cannabis referendum held in conjunction with the election will be known on October 30.