NLN 2016 Abstract Submission from Oregon

Title: Exploring the Perceptions and Use Patterns of Pregnant and Postpartum Cannabis Users

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Background: In many countries cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug. Cannabis use among pregnant women is common, with 4.6%, 2.9%, and 1.4% reporting use during the first, second, and third trimesters, respectively. This same study noted that 3.8% and 5.3% of mothers with children under 3 months and 11 months of age, respectively, reported cannabis use, suggesting that many women who cease use during pregnancy resume use shortly after childbirth. The primary psychoactive compound in cannabis, D9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), can pass through the placenta prenatally and be transmitted in mothers' milk. Although the short- and long-term adverse effects of cannabis exposure on the developing fetus and newborn infant have been documented, relatively little is known about the factors that support and maintain cannabis use among pregnant or breastfeeding mothers.

Project Goals: Explore beliefs related to cannabis use among pregnant and breastfeeding mothers through qualitative interviews. The primary goal of such interviews is to identify beliefs and attitudes that support cannabis use while pregnant and/or breastfeeding, including mothers' perceptions of risk associated with the transfer of THC and other cannabinoids to their infants through the placenta or breast milk. Expected outcome from these interviews include a better contextual understanding of mothers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of risk associated with concurrent cannabis use.

Methods: Up to 40 interviews based on a grounded theory approach will be conducted with English speaking WIC participants, 21 years of age or older, pregnant or within 12 months postpartum who use cannabis in any form on average twice per week.

Public Health Implications: Recent shifts in public policy are a possible source of confusion regarding the harms associated with cannabis use while pregnant or breastfeeding. In recent years, cannabis for medical use has been increasingly accepted within the U.S. Twenty-three states plus the District of Columbia have enacted laws that allow the use of cannabis for medical purposes, and four U.S. states have recently legalized the use and sale of cannabis for recreational purposes.

Because states are increasingly recognizing medicinal and recreational use of cannabis through legislation, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers might erroneously believe that their use of cannabis is not harmful to their fetuses or to breastfed children. Similarly, pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers may hold other beliefs that make their use of cannabis during these periods acceptable or desirable. The research proposed here will attempt to fill current knowledge gaps about these beliefs and perceptions and will eventually lead to the development of more effective educational messages to be used in settings such as WIC with women who regularly use cannabis medicinally or recreationally and are not likely to be persuaded by general public health warnings about risks of cannabis use.