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THE Weekend

PICTURE: ROB CURRIE



Yes we Medicann

Medicann Cannabis Clinic chief executive Gary Whipp on how cannabis can change lives and dispelling common misconceptions about the drug

The Weekend *Big Read*

'I realised we could do it ourselves, here in Jersey, and it'd generate income, it'd generate tax, it'd generate GST, it'd generate employment – and it has. It was one of those lightbulb moments'

Gary Whipp is chief executive of Medicann Cannabis Clinic. He spoke to **Tom Ogg** about the 'life-changing' properties of cannabis and the importance of challenging common misconceptions about the drug

CANNABIS has been much in the news of late, including here in the JEP, with the Health Minister himself recently announcing that a softer stance on possessing cannabis would "make a lot of sense".

There are few, however, who know more about the topic than Gary Whipp – and this despite him never having smoked a single leaf of marijuana in his life.

"There are so many misconceptions surrounding cannabis," says the married father-of-three, who has lived with his family in Jersey for almost two decades.

"The tide of public opinion is definitely turning, but slowly. I want people to recognise medicinal cannabis as a medication because far too many people, when they hear 'cannabis', still picture someone sitting with a Rizla having a smoke."

To this end, Gary co-founded Medicann in 2020, an award-winning Medicinal Cannabis Clinic of which he is chief executive.

Based in Jersey, but with additional clinics in Guernsey and the Isle of Man, Medicann offers "expert, patient-centric, medicinal cannabis consultations and education".

"The first thing to say is that cannabis is not a miracle cure," says Gary, chatting in his office at the Medicann headquarters on the Esplanade.

"However, it can and does change people's lives, and, when you see this happening, it is just incredible."

Anyone dismissing such talk as hyperbole would be wrong to do so, as evidenced by the many anecdotes Gary offers of his firsthand encounters with Medicann patients' whose lives have been changed for the better.

"One of the very first patients we ever

saw was an elderly lady: old but not ancient," he recalls. "At that time, we were based at the Lido [Medical Practice] and this lady struggled even to walk down to the consulting room. I helped her along the hallway, she met with the doctor, and then afterwards she asked if she could have a chat and a cup of tea with me, to which I said yes. Then I helped her back to her car where her son was waiting for her."

"Fast forward three months and a call comes into clinic. When I heard the lady's name mentioned, I thought: 'oh dear, what's happened?' I thought perhaps she'd had a bad fall. Instead, she said: 'Gary, you're not going to believe this – I'm in the garden doing the gardening'. This lady, who had struggled even to walk along a hallway, was now outside doing the gardening."

"It is this sort of thing that just makes you think 'wow'," he adds. "As I say, it's not a miracle cure, but it really, truly does change lives."

Further evidence of the life-changing abilities of medicinal cannabis will be found in a documentary series, High Science, in which Medicann recently took part, and which is due to be broadcast on Netflix either this year or next.

While filming in Jersey last summer, the High Science team met with eight of the 1,500 registered Medicann patients and chatted to them about their treatment.

"They picked the patients entirely at random and, I'll tell you, you could not have paid actors or actresses any amount of money to give a more genuine and positive picture," says Gary.

"There was one guy in particular – I almost cried in his lounge. I listened to

his story and it was just so emotional. He had been having something like 100 to 200 seizures every year, and every three or four of these would result in him being hospitalised. He'd heard that cannabis would help, but it wasn't available at the time and obviously he didn't want to break the law, and so he moved out to Spain and tried it there. I think he was there about six months, and it didn't really do much to help, and so he came back to Jersey and it was then that he came to visit us for treatment.

"The first month of treatment, a little bit of improvement, nothing special. The second month, we tweaked the medication – again, a little bit better, but not much. The third month – we cracked it. Last year, he had just three seizures in the entire year, which is quite a reduction

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■ Medicann chief executive Gary Whipp
Picture: ROB CURRIE (37661694)

from 100-plus.

"Prior to Medicann, this guy wasn't a happy person at all," continues Gary. "He never left the house, he wasn't a husband to his wife, wasn't a father to his son. It was his family who looked after him, not the other way round, and it wasn't how he wanted to live. And now, here he was saying Medicann had changed his life. I willed up listening to him."

The initial idea for Medicann came about at a time when the Government of Jersey was looking into offering licenses to local companies to grow cannabis in the Island.

"I had a friend who was then the sales director of Jersey Royal [Company] and one night we were playing poker and got talking about medicinal cannabis," recalls Gary. "It was something I knew a bit about, even then. I'd researched it and had been looking into it for about four or five years. I'd looked into CBD [a compound found in marijuana] and its effects, and I'd researched medicinal cannabis in Canada and the US and elsewhere. And so I said to my friend: 'Look, there is great synergy between the two of us. I have technical experience and I have contacts, and you have all the buildings, the staff, the equipment'."

"Yes, there would be an investment to be made, but the general infrastructure was already there."

By late 2019, Gary knew everything there was to know about the ins and outs of medicinal cannabis, which had been legalised in the UK in late 2018, and introduced in Jersey shortly thereafter. Yet he was also noticing irregularities in the system that was then in place.

"It was really strange because every



clinician was registered here but based in the UK," he says. "There wasn't a local clinic in Jersey. You couldn't get the product dispensed locally. As a result, we, as an island, were not earning a penny from it. As far as I'm aware, none of them were paying GST or tax. And it just seemed weird to me.

"Jersey was missing out on employment tax and opportunities within the medicinal cannabis field, and all local patients were being charged £200-plus for a consultation, and with the revenues all going to UK doctors and pharmacies.

"It was also putting a serious burden on customs because these English companies were sending in 200 to 300 parcels, all at different times, and all with cannabis in them. It was putting a real strain on customs because they would have to go through it all – and it would send their drug dogs absolutely bananas. The dogs would go completely nuts. I witnessed it firsthand.

"Anyway, I looked into it all and thought: 'we're missing a trick here'. So I spoke to a couple of local politicians, spoke to doctors, spoke to pharmacies, and I said: 'We can do this ourselves, here in Jersey, and it'll generate income, it'll generate tax, it'll generate GST, it'll generate employment' – and it has. It was one of those lightbulb moments."

Having got the basics in place, Gary and the burgeoning Medicann team then arranged for the cannabis to be brought into the Island from the UK in as straightforward a manner as possible.

"We don't bring in from any other jurisdiction simply because it makes it so much easier for our own local regulators. If it comes from the UK then that means it has been approved by the Home Office and has been through MHRA [Medicines

and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency]. It means our regulators don't have to worry as they would if we did a deal with, say, Colombia or somewhere like that.

"If you look at cannabis as a medicine, which of course it is, then people should not be without their medicine," he adds. "If I needed my diabetes medicine and I was told: 'Well actually, you can't have it this week, you'll have to wait until next week', I'd say: 'Hang on a minute, that's no good – I need my medicine'. And the same is true of those in need of medicinal cannabis. We have now removed that worry."

Born and raised on the Isle of Man, Gary moved to the UK at the age of 22 and spent many years working as a manager for various large sales companies in, among others cities, Bristol, Edinburgh and Manchester.

In 1998, he played a key role in the launch of Sky TV in the UK. Having achieved one million sales, Gary then moved into the telecommunications industry, working with Cable and Wireless and acquiring their "voice business", which he promptly renamed Cable Direct.

It was shortly after selling Cable Direct to Carphone Warehouse in 2004 (who renamed it Talk Talk Business) that Gary and his family relocated to the Channel Islands.

"Initially, I took the wife and kids to Guernsey but they didn't like it very much, they weren't impressed at all," he laughs. "And so then we looked at Jersey – and everyone loved it. That was 19 years ago and we've been here ever since."

Returning to the subject of Medicann, Gary says that one of the most important factors for him is to educate people

about the important differences between medicinal cannabis and recreational cannabis.

"You have people who have used cannabis all of their lives but they have a genuine medical condition and so they have to have it. But then there are also those who use it but wouldn't qualify for medicinal cannabis. And part of what we want to do is convince such people that, no, cannabis really shouldn't be put in a Rizla, and, no, you can't carry it around on your person without a prescription. And you definitely – and I really can't stress this enough – you definitely shouldn't smoke it. It's on every script that we have: 'This product must only be used using a dry herb vapouriser'.

"When you use a vapouriser, you're vaping at a very specific temperature, but when you set light to cannabis you're burning it at a much higher temperature. Medicinal cannabis has terpenes in it, which are an important contributing factor to the medicinal properties. If you put the cannabis in a Rizla and set light to it, the terpenes are going to be burnt off, whereas, if you're burning it at a set temperature in a vapouriser, then you're getting all the benefits of those terpenes.

"Interestingly, one of the patients that was filmed for the documentary series said: 'I've never smoked, never had a joint in my life'. And he said to me: 'You're not going to believe this, Gary. I had CPOD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – a lung disorder] and I struggled even to walk up and down the stairs'. But now his specialist has discharged him from the clinic because his lung capacity has become so good that it is now better than the guy who was testing him. The cannabis has opened up his airways. And, of course, he wouldn't have got that had

he put it in a Rizla.

"Also, people who put it in a Rizla will do so with tobacco, which is addictive, and so there is yet another reason not to smoke it."

In fact, as Gary says, those using medicinal cannabis often don't even have to inhale anything at all: "It comes in a capsule, a lozenge, as an oil, and so on. People often don't want to smoke, they don't want to inhale anything, not even using a vapouriser. This is especially the case with a lot of senior people and so the fact that there is a lozenge available for them is amazing. They can use a sublingual pill that they put under their tongue for two minutes and it's ideal for them."

"There are idiosyncrasies between all the different medications. Oil, for example, takes an hour to two hours to take effect but it lasts longer, whereas if you inhale with a vapouriser the effort is almost immediate but it wears off quicker.

"It must be said that medicinal cannabis is not a cheap medication," he adds. "And there is no support from the government – it's all done on a private basis. Given this, the fact that people come back every month and pay what I would class as a lot of money has got to be evidence in itself that cannabis is working for them. Because otherwise they'd stick with the free medication. They'd stick with all the other drugs and the opioids that are free but that are also potentially addictive and cost the state a lot of money.

"Quite rightly, they want to get off those and that is primary driver for a lot of people who come to us."

■ For more details, visit medicann.co.uk