

# The Chronic Pain & Fatigue Research Center (CPFRC)

*presents*

Spring 2023

# The Health Equity Core Newsletter

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The latest news, views, and announcements

## **Mission:**

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We aim to improve the quality of chronic pain care by elevating the voices of patient communities in research.



# Project Spotlight

## **Medicinal Marijuana/Cannabis and Chronic Pain among Veterans in Michigan**

This month, we want to focus our “Project Spotlight” on one of our current studies at the Chronic Pain & Fatigue Research Center. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of chronic pain among Veterans while also determining whether medicinal cannabis use could prove beneficial in pain/symptom management. So, what is medicinal cannabis?

Medicinal Cannabis (also known as medicinal marijuana) refers to products made from Cannabis sativa, a plant which is known by many names including marijuana, pot, or weed. Medicinal cannabis products are available for patients who are authorized to possess these products by their medical provider (typically a doctor). Patients with this authorization can purchase cannabis from licensed dispensaries or grow their own.

As we know, there are many individuals living with chronic pain conditions who are seeking a variety of ways to manage their pain symptoms. We also learned that there are many research gaps in terms of not only available alternative treatments, but also a lack of resources available amongst diverse populations who need these same resources.

So that’s where our team stepped in with our interview study with Veterans. This study consists of one-on-one interviews with Veterans across the state of Michigan, who are either currently using medicinal cannabis for their chronic pain management, or those who may be seeking alternative ways (non-opioid) to relieve pain symptoms.

Below is an example of some of our preliminary findings related to this study:

- Participants talked about how frustrating it was to have chronic pain and how it limited their ability to work, spend time with family, and be as active as they want to be.
- Participants reported many other symptoms along with their chronic pain including depression, anxiety, migraines, nausea, and difficulty sleeping.
- Some of the benefits that participants attributed to their cannabis use included better sleep quality, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and less pain.
- Participants also talked about their concerns related to cannabis use, like how much it costs and wondering how it could affect their mental health.

This research will help us improve our understanding of cannabis use for chronic pain among Veterans and how we conduct future research studies, as well as prove beneficial in helping our team develop educational interventional resources for those individuals who would like to learn more regarding the benefits of medicinal cannabis use for managing chronic pain.

To learn more about this study, or if you or someone would like to participate, please email us at: [vmr-admin@umich.edu](mailto:vmr-admin@umich.edu).

# Ask the Researcher: Kevin Boehnke, PhD

This month, we would like to introduce you to Kevin Boehnke, PhD. Kevin is a Research Assistant Professor, as well as Director of Controversial Compounds here at the Chronic Pain & Fatigue Research Center. Kevin is also the lead PI (Principal Investigator) for our program of research related to cannabis and chronic pain among Veterans.

Read below to see what Dr. Boehnke had to say about his background and why he chose research as his career focus:

## **1. Can you give me some background into why you chose research as your career path?**

Research is one of the ways I try to better understand myself and the world. When applied appropriately, I also see it as a useful lens and method to help guide societal change. While I initially started my research career studying water quality and public health, I was drawn to researching chronic pain because of my own experiences with fibromyalgia. Fourteen years ago, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia after a long period of suffering, uncertainty, and painful symptoms. Working through stages of my own healing (a process that is still ongoing), I discovered that many of the questions arising in my life about pain management were also open research questions. So, I eventually turned my eye away from water and towards chronic pain. Cannabis was a wonderful entry point into chronic pain research for me. I had personally found it to be a useful medicine and knew that there was much we still need to understand about using cannabis medically. I'm also motivated by my desire to change prohibitionist drug policies around cannabis which have had horrific societal impacts, including incarceration, trauma, familial separation, and voter disenfranchisement. I am honored to have the privilege each day to think about questions around individual experience (including my own) all the way out to societal impacts and narratives.

## **2. What does research mean to you? What do you hope to bring to the community with the work that you do?**

To me, research fundamentally means cultivating internal openness and curiosity about the world. That openness then transmutes into asking thoughtful questions about how we choose to live, and then translating what we find into meaningful action. I hope that my work helps people discover their own sense of power and be able to live in ways that align with their values.

## **3. What are some of your hopes for the future of research? What topics/subjects would you like to shed more light on? What are some of your goals? Any changes you would like to see implemented in the way research/studies are conducted?**

I'd like to see research more democratized. In my view, research doesn't (and shouldn't) belong to universities or companies, but instead is part of our shared way of understanding being living creatures on a living planet. Some of my hopes for democratizing research including more effectively elevating voices of people who have direct experience with the subject matter, doing work that acknowledges personal wholeness and interconnectedness, and channeling funding into projects designed to directly benefit participants. For example, in pain research I've been consistently struck by how there are many



low-risk and established ancient healing modalities known to provide some relief—such as acupuncture, massage, meditation, and movement-based therapies with appropriate pacing. Yet these therapies are typically not covered by insurance while other higher risk treatments—including surgeries, injections, and pain medications like opioids—are all covered. I'd love to see research targeted at understanding how to make our ancient healing modalities more accessible, given that they have stood the test of time and generally held up quite well under our modern scientific lens.

Right now, my personal research focus is on cannabis and psychedelics, such as psilocybin-containing mushrooms. As with many of the therapies I mentioned above, these ancient medicines have been used by humans for thousands of years. In addition to their obvious therapeutic potential, these drugs are very unlikely to cause lethal overdose, unlike many other medications available today. For example, thousands of people die each year from over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen. Since state and municipal policies have allowed access to cannabis (and in some places, psychedelics), I want to characterize how people are using these drugs and draw out lessons of what works and what doesn't. I'd then like to be able to develop strategies to help translate these lessons into meaningful medical and social structures to support people most effectively use these drugs as medicine.

#### **4. What do you enjoy doing in your spare time? Any outside hobbies or interest?**

I enjoy taking walks, growing vegetables, cooking, eating, singing, playing frisbee, listening to music, going camping, and immersing myself in the Great Lakes. I also practice yoga, meditation, and qigong. I love sharing my time and these activities with family and friends.

#### **5. Anything else that you think you would like readers to know about 😊**

Dear reader: You are enough. I wish you kindness, compassion, serenity, and love.

## **Community Engagement**

On February 11, 2023, the Health Equity Core hosted our second Community Meet & Greet, where we partnered with organizations across the Metro Detroit area, to disseminate information and resources surrounding the importance of health equity and community engagement feedback for the research studies and projects that exists within our community. This event was held at the University of Michigan Detroit Center, in Detroit, MI.

Among our vendors, we were honored to have representatives from these organizations below, share their knowledge and resources with our community members in attendance.





Vendors at this event included Sickle Cell Disease Association of America (Detroit Chapter), Mothering Justice, U of M School of Public Health and School of Kinesiology, Common Citizen Dispensary, Michigan Canna Nurses, Richey, Consultants, and Canna Health & Wellness.

Our community partners participated in a Town Hall discussion surrounding the gaps in research and healthcare in under-served and under-resourced communities, as well as some of their perspectives on the inequities/disparities within the

healthcare system and the resources and tools that they would like to see available within their own communities.

Another focus of our Town Hall was to discuss the use of medicinal cannabis/marijuana for management of chronic pain conditions, as well as some of the stigmas surrounding its use and treatment outcomes.

The Health Equity Core's next Community Meet & Greet will be held on Saturday, April 22, 2023 at the University of Michigan Detroit Center, located at 3663 Woodward Ave, Suite 150, Detroit, MI, from 11:00 AM-1:00 PM.

If you or someone you know would like to host a table/vendor table, we would love to have you! Please send any inquiries and/or details about your organization to [HEC-admin@umich.edu](mailto:HEC-admin@umich.edu), and we would be happy to have a member of our team speak with you and provide additional information for this event.

## **Staff Spotlight: Anthony Fauser**



Anthony joined the CPFRC as a Clinical Research Coordinator in November 2022. He previously attended Grand Valley State University and graduated with a bachelor's degree in Biochemistry. A Michigan native with a close family bond, Anthony credits his family, especially his mother and father, with helping him become the individual he is today. He says that it was his parents' openness, honesty, and guidance that gave him the confidence to step out into the world and pursue his passions. As Anthony stated during his interview, it was his mother who first noticed his interest in science and got him started on the research path.

Anthony's heart has always been in helping others, expressing previous interest in the field of nursing, as well as genetic counseling. Anthony considers himself to be a lifelong learner, and always looks for new ways to grow his expertise, and one way he does this is to constantly put himself in a position to learn from others, no matter

what stage or position in life they may be in.

In his role as a Clinical Research Coordinator, Anthony conducts sensory testing, which helps us understand people's pain levels and how different treatments might help with pain. One of the things that Anthony loves most about his job is the focus on finding possible solutions for pain conditions like fibromyalgia and back pain. He listens closely when working with research volunteers and understands that they may have some fears and concerns about pain. Anthony shared, "Sometimes, you are the only person that they can express these feelings to. So, I try to go in the rooms with the participants and bring a little bit of joy and positivity to them... I want them to see a little bit of lighthearted and fun, even if its temporary."

Anthony's interest includes mental health awareness, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and community outreach. When asked if he had any thoughts or words of wisdom to share with others who may be searching to find their dream job, Anthony left us with this advice, "Never be afraid to go after what you want in life. Don't be afraid of the 'what ifs. Life is like a valley; some days there will be highs, and some days there will be lows. But when you get to the point where you can come home at the end of the day and be proud of yourself and your personal journey... regardless of what others say or think about your choices, that is going to show you a lot about your true character."

After speaking with Anthony, it is apparent why those around him are drawn to his infectious personality and easy-going nature. One can truly see and feel the passion that he has for the important role that he contributes to the pain research field.

## Community Partner Spotlight: Lisa Thomas



This month's Community Member Spotlight is Lisa Tillman Thomas. Lisa is one of our community members who has shared her experience about what it like living with daily chronic pain due to her diagnosis of fibromyalgia, gastroparesis, as well as undifferentiated connective tissue disease. Lisa, along with her younger brother, were raised in a loving home by her single mother on Detroit's eastside. Lisa went on to graduate from Oakland University, where she earned her bachelor's degree.

Lisa says that although her childhood was fairly healthy, it wasn't until she was pregnant with her first child at the age of 26 that she first began to notice a change in her health. That's when she first experienced extremely painful symptoms of separated pubic synthesis, which led to her having to use a walker for the duration of her pregnancy, as well as a few times a year since then.

Throughout her health journey with chronic pain over the years, Lisa says that she has had to advocate for herself. She learned early on that people don't always receive the best pain care from doctors. She also says that she realized that it was important to her to avoid the stigmas that she often saw associated with Black women when it came to their experiences of living with and trying to manage their chronic pain. Although Lisa says she it felt as if she was fighting an uphill battle for many years, she is grateful that she now has a team of doctors who are not only knowledgeable about the conditions that she lives with, but also exhibit excellent bedside manner and understand that SHE is the most important member of her healthcare team.

Lisa says that she is grateful for her mom, who is responsible for ensuring that she understood the importance of her voice when it came to advocating for her own health. Lisa is also very appreciative to have the support of her husband, children, family, and many friends.

Even on her “bad” days, one of the mottos that Lisa lives by is “Always be grateful because even on your roughest days, there is always someone who is praying for the life you are living.”

## Community Education

**Mindfulness & Healthy Eating Minicourse:** On February 15, 2023, the Health equity Core hosted its first free Mindful Eating Minicourse, via Zoom. The goal of this educational course is to help participants improve their relationship with food and feel more nourished in their everyday life. This course will also be offered in-person for groups in and surrounding Metro Detroit. For anyone interested in participating in our future courses (virtual or in person), please email [HEC-admin@umich.edu](mailto:HEC-admin@umich.edu), and we will be happy to provide you with additional information.

**2023 Rehabilitation Psychology Conference:** Keeping with the theme of activities during the month of February, on February 15-19, 2023, we were in Austin, TX, for the 2023 Rehabilitation Psychology Conference, where our community engaged research coordinator presented to an audience of healthcare professionals. This conference focused on promoting disability rights and justice within the specialty area of rehabilitation psychology, as well as the broader human rights movement.

Our presentation was based on the subject of the importance of community engagement in research. The purpose of this presentation was to highlight the inequities and many disparities that exist within our healthcare system, while also shedding light on the negative impact that these issues can have on the research and medical field as a whole.

As a reminder, we welcome feedback on any our research studies that you may have participated in, as we continue to improve our education resources for the researchers and clinicians.

## Calendar of Events: April 2023

**Saturday, April 1:** Mindful Eating Minicourse, New Mt Hermon MBC, 3225 Deacon Street Detroit, MI 48217

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**Saturday, April 15:** Enhancing Lives by Empowering the Lupus Community Detroit Education Symposium & Luncheon

10:00 AM - 2:00 PM EDT

St. Andrews Hall, 5105 Anthony Wayne Dr, Detroit, MI 48202, USA

**Saturday, April 22:** 3<sup>rd</sup> Health Equity Core Meet & Greet -University of Michigan Detroit Center  
3663 Woodward Ave, Ste. 150, Detroit MI 48202

**Future events:** Starting this summer, we will be offering a 6-session mini course on mindful eating for a small group of community members. The goal of this educational course is to help you improve your relationship with food and feel more nourished in your everyday life. If you're interested in participating, please let us know at [HEC-admin@umich.edu](mailto:HEC-admin@umich.edu).

# Additional Resources

**PainGuide:** <https://painguide.com/>

**PASCguide:** <https://www.pascguide.com/>

**Lupus:** <https://www.conquerlupus.com/>

**Sickle Cell Disease:** <https://abettermewithscd.com/>

**The CPFRC Health Equity Core:** <https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/cpfr/health-equity-core>