

Cannabis in India: ancient lore and modern medicine

Ethan Russo

GW Pharmaceuticals, 2235 Wylie Avenue, Missoula, MT 59809, USA

Introduction: Ayurvedic medicine

India is a land steeped in faith and mysticism. *Ayurveda*, combining the Sanskrit words for life and knowledge, is a system of medicine intertwined inextricably with these traits. That a core of belief combined with empirical experimentation could produce a viable medical regimen still widely practiced after well over 3000 years is astounding to Western physicians. Cannabis was similarly bound to faith and mysticism in India in the past, in the Hindu and Islamic traditions, as well as in numerous other minority religions [1]. Merlin recently explained it well [2], “with the powerful tools of modern science and human imagination, our understanding of our deep-rooted desire to experience *ecstasy* in the original sense of the word (to break the mind free from the body and communicate with the ‘gods’ or the ancestors) will become clear with time”. This chapter will seek to examine the medical claims for cannabis of the past, and place them in a contemporary light given current pharmacological knowledge.

Ayurveda is based on a conceptual medical system that seeks to balance three functional elements, called *doshas*, that the human body is composed of, and are commonly represented as *Vata* or *Vayu* (ether or air), *Pitta* (fire and water) and *Kapha* (phlegm or water and earth). Nadkarni [3] has rejected these simple relationships in favor of more abstract assignments [3]:

“...the word *Vayu*, does not imply ‘Wind’ in Ayurvedic literature, but comprehends all the phenomena which come under the functions of the Central and Sympathetic Nervous Systems; that the word *Pitta* does not essentially mean ‘Bile’ but signifies the functions of Thermogenesis or heat production and metabolism, comprehending in its scope the process of digestion, coloration of blood and formation of various secretions and excretions and that the word *Kapha* does not mean ‘Phlegm’ but is used primarily to imply the functions of Thermo-taxis or heat regulation and secondarily formation of the various preservative fluids, e.g., Mucus, Synovia, etc., ...”