

***The Rhode Island Medical Marijuana Program: An Exploratory Study***

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**Purpose:** The study was designed to describe the formulation and implementation of the program; identify stakeholder expectations and perceptions of the program; identify patient's expectations prior to enrollment; and identify patient's perceived experience of the enrollment process.

**Background:** On January 3, 2006, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted legislation that mandated the Department of Health (DOH) to implement a program to register qualified patients and their caregivers to allow possession and cultivation of limited amounts of marijuana for personal use for statutorily defined illnesses and debilitating conditions.

**Methods:** This exploratory program evaluation used the Conceptual Model of Nursing and Health Policy (CMNHP) to ascertain how the Rhode Island medical marijuana program meets or fails to meet its objectives. A purposeful, criterion-based, typical case sampling procedure was used to recruit 15 enrolled patients and five non-patient stakeholders. Data analysis included content analysis of legislative and regulatory documents, relevant newspaper articles, editorials and letters to the editor; analysis of data from the DOH registration database; and analysis of transcripts of face-to-face participant interviews.

**Results:** The study findings indicated that the CMNHP provided clear guidance for formulation of the study methodology and design of interview questions; that the 309 different practitioners who had certified 980 patients was an indication of a level of program effectiveness meeting patient needs; that there was no indication that patients had been arrested or prosecuted for participating in the program; and that despite ongoing concerns with consistent access to marijuana, patients were pleased that the program existed.

**Conclusions and Implications:** It is essential that nurses become informed about health policy analysis and evaluation through study of public policy with implications for access to health care. The growing use of marijuana as medicine in the United States signifies the importance of thorough patient assessment regarding treatment of patients' symptoms. The findings of this exploratory study highlight the need for nurses in all practice settings to be cognizant of the many options for treatment available to patients and to educate themselves about these options to ensure safe and effective patient care.