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Efficacy, tolerability and safety of Cannabinoid Treatments in the Rheumatic Diseases: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials

Mary-Ann Fitzcharles[1,2], Peter A. Ste-Marie[2], Winfried Häuser[3,4] , Daniel J. Clauw[5], Shahin Jamal[6], Jacob Karsh[7], Tara Landry[8], Sharon LeClercq[9], Jason J. McDougall[10], Yoram Shir[2], Kam Shojania[6,11] , Zach Walsh[12]

[1] Division of Rheumatology, McGill University Health Centre, Quebec, Canada, [2] Alan Edwards Pain Management Unit, McGill University Health Centre, Quebec, Canada, [3] Department Internal Medicine I, Klinikum Saarbrücken, Saarbrücken, Germany, [4] Department of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Technische Universität München, München, Germany, [5] Department of Anaesthesiology, Chronic Pain and Fatigue Research Center, University of Michigan Medical Center, Michigan, United States of America, [6]Division of Rheumatology, University of British Columbia, British Columbia, Canada, [7] Division of Rheumatology, The Ottawa Hospital, Ontario, Canada, [8] McGill University Health Center, Montreal General Hospital Medical Library, [9] Department of Medicine, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, [10] Departments of Pharmacology and Anaesthesia, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada, [11] Arthritis Research Centre of Canada, British Columbia, Canada, [12]University of British Columbia, British Columbia, Canada

Address corresponding author: Mary-Ann Fitzcharles, Montreal General Hospital, McGill University Health Centre, 1650 Cedar ave, Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1A4
Tel no: (514)-934-1934#44176
Fax no: (514)-934-8239
E-mail:mary-ann.fitzcharles@muhc.mcgill.ca

Running head: Systematic review of cannabinoid effects in rheumatic diseases

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess the efficacy, tolerability and safety of cannabinoids (phyto- and syntheto-) in the management of rheumatic diseases.

Methods: Multiple databases including Medline, EMBASE and CENTRAL were searched. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with outcomes of pain, sleep, quality of life, tolerability (drop outs due to adverse events) and safety (serious adverse events), with comparison of cannabinoids with any type of control were included. Study methodology quality was evaluated with the Cochrane risk of bias tool.

Results: In four short term studies comprising 201 patients, (58 RA, 71 FM, and 74 OA), cannabinoids had a statistically significant effect on pain in two, sleep in two and improved quality of life in one, with the study in OA prematurely terminated due to futility. The risk of bias was high for all three completed studies. Dizziness, cognitive problems and drowsiness, as well as nauseawere reported for almost half of the patients. No serious adverse events were reported for cannabinoids during study duration. No studies of herbal cannabis were identified.

Conclusion: Extremely small sample sizes, short study duration, heterogeneity of rheumatic conditions and products, and absence of study of herbal cannabis, allow for only limited conclusions for the effects of cannabinoids in rheumatic conditions. Pain relief and effect on sleep may have some potential therapeutic benefit, but with considerable mild to moderate adverse events. There is currently insufficient evidence to recommend cannabinoid treatments for management of rheumatic diseases pending further study.

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SIGNIFICANCE AND INNOVATIONS

- The human endocannabinoid system modulates the body towards homeostasis with effects on pain, inflammation and sleep.
- There are limited studies of the effects of exogenous cannabinoids in the management of symptoms of rheumatic diseases
- The existing evidence for effects on pain and sleep is poor, although cannabinoids may hold potential pending further study. Neurocognitive and gastrointestinal adverse effects may limit use.

Rheumatic diseases are an important cause of chronic pain, with imperfect response to current analgesic pharmacologic treatments. Recent study has identified an extensive endocannabinoid system in the animal kingdom, comprised of endogenous ligands and receptors throughout the organism, but with important localization to nervous tissue. The primary function of this system in the developed human being is to maintain homeostasis, which includes modulation of pain and inflammation [1]. Exogenous molecules with cannabinoid properties may therefore also function to engage this system, with particular interest in the effects on pain. Originally available as the herbal preparation derived from the hemp plant *Cannabis sativa*, cannabinoids have been used through the ages for alleged therapeutic effects. Currently, musculoskeletal pain is a common reason why persons use herbal cannabis for medicinal reasons [2-5]. With use of the herbal product as a means of self-medication by up to 10% of persons with chronic noncancer pain in Canada pain, pharmaceutical preparations have been developed and are now available for certain indications in some countries [6]. Therefore it is timely to examine the evidence for effect of the various cannabinoid molecules in persons with rheumatic diseases [7].

Cannabinoids exist as endocannabinoids which are natural regulatory molecules produced in our bodies, phytocannabinoids derived from the plant material or as synthesized pharmaceutical preparations, synthetocannabinoids [8]. The effects of herbal cannabis are mediated via plant alkaloids with two molecules, namely delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9-THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), having particular interest for therapeutic effects [9-11]. Analogues of mostly THC have been synthesized, allowing for administration of defined amounts, compared to the variable composition of naturally occurring herbal products. Current preparations are available as four products; the herbal product administered by a weight measurement in grams, and three pharmacologic preparations; two synthetic oral agents, dronabinol, a stereoisomer of Δ^9-THC, and nabilone, a synthetic analogue of Δ^9-THC, and an oromucosal spray of cannabis extract, nabiximol, a combination of Δ^9-THC and CBD, as well as trace amounts of minor phytocannabinoids [7]. Several drugs under development manipulate the endocannabinoid system by inhibiting enzymes that hydrolyze endocannabinoids and thereby boost the levels of the endogenous molecules. Blockade of the catabolic enzyme fatty acid amide hydrolase (FAAH) elevates anandamide levels and elicits antinociceptive effects, without the psychomimetic side effects associated with Δ^9-THC [12].

As this class of molecules may hold potential for symptom relief for pain related to rheumatic conditions, we have examined the literature for evidence of effects for cannabinoids as a therapy for patients with rheumatic diseases, which include inflammatory arthritis, peripheral osteoarthritis, soft tissue rheumatism and fibromyalgia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
The Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRA), in response to the Government of Canada decision to revise its herbal cannabis for medicinal use policies, mandated this systematic review to better understand the use of cannabinoids pertaining to the management of persons with rheumatic diseases. Rheumatic diseases were defined as conditions affecting the musculoskeletal system, including systemic rheumatic diseases, osteoarthritis of peripheral and spinal regions, soft tissue rheumatism and fibromyalgia. As a preliminary step, the CRA convened a working group to conduct a needs assessment regarding rheumatologist confidence regarding cannabinoid

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preparations in general and herbal cannabis in particular. Rheumatologists reported considerable lack of confidence in their knowledge of cannabinoids in general and in their ability to provide advice regarding use of cannabinoids for rheumatology patients in general [13]. Thereafter a librarian from the McGill University Health Centre (TL) conducted the literature search.

Identification of studies

A comprehensive literature search of the following databases was conducted in September 2013 and further updated in January 2015 : MEDLINE (via OvidSP 1946 to 25/Sep/2013; via PubMed 1946 to 26/Sep/2013) ; Embase Classic + Embase (via OvidSP 1947 to 24/Sep/2013); BIOSIS Previews (via OvidSP 1969 to 2013 Week 43); Web of Science (via ThomsonReuters 1996 to 29/Sep/2013); Scopus (via Elsevier 1996 to 26/Sep/2013); CENTRAL (via Cochrane Library to issue 9 of 12, 2013); DARE (via Wiley, to issue 3 of 4, July 2013); CINAHL (via Ebsco to 29/Sep/2013); PsycINFO (via OvidSP 1806 to September Week 4 2013); AMED (via OvidSP, 1985 to September 2013). Searches for ongoing clinical trials were also run in ClinicalTrials.gov (www.clinicaltrials.gov/ 05/12/2013), International Clinical Trials Registry Platform (http://apps.who.int/trialsearch/ 05/12/2013), Current Controlled Trials (http://www.controlled-trials.com/ 05/12/2013), Natural Standard (http://www.naturalstandard.com/ 05/12/2013), as well as various drug and device regulatory approval sites. Further studies were identified in Web of Science and Scopus (18/Mar/2014) by carrying out citation searches for studies citing included studies, as well as by examining their reference lists. The search strategy outlined in Figure 1, combined the 2 following concepts: cannabinoids and rheumatic diseases, using text words and relevant indexing. The full MEDLINE strategy was applied to all databases, with modifications to search terms as necessary.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that assessed at least one outcome of pain, sleep disturbance and/or quality of life in rheumatic diseases, with comparison of a cannabinoid with placebo or an active control were included, without limitations for study duration and patients included per treatment arm. Only articles with full text in either English or French were included.

Quality assessment

Risk of bias in included studies was assessed independently by two authors (PSM and MAF) using the criteria outlined in the "Risk of bias" tool in the Cochrane Handbook for systematic Reviews of Interventions and adapted from those used by the Cochrane and Pregnancy and Childbirth Group [14]. We resolved any disagreement by discussion. The following were assessed for each study: 1.Random sequence generation (selection bias); 2. Allocation concealment (selection bias); 3. Blinding of outcome assessment (detection bias); 4. Incomplete outcome data (attrition bias due to amount, nature and handling of incomplete outcome data); 5. Size (possible bias confounded by small size, with low risk of bias if there were 200 participants, unclear risk with 50 to 200 participants, and high risk if there were fewer than 50 participants)Risk of bias within each study was assessed as low (when there was low risk for all domains), unclear (if there was unclear risk for one or more domains), and high (if there was high risk for one or more key domains). GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation) was used to rate the overall quality of the evidence, with GRADE

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ratings of very low-, low-, moderate, or high-quality evidence reflective of the extent to which we are confident in the overall effect of a treatment [15].

Data extraction

Data were recorded on a standardized form by two of the authors (MAF and PSM). The following information was recorded for each study: first author, year of publication, specific agent studied, study design, sample size, specific disease studied, and outcome measurements reported. Where possible data on the following outcomes were recorded: pain intensity, sleep quality, and health-related quality of life. Adverse events reported for each study were recorded with attention to the following: somnolence, cognitive complaints, and gastrointestinal complaints. The number of patients dropping out due to adverse events (tolerability), as well as the total number of severe adverse events including deaths (safety) was recorded for each study.

RESULTS

Literature search

The electronic database search and initial screening for eligible studies yielded 1663 articles after removal of duplicates, with 22 studies selected for full text review (see Figure 2 for a PRISMA flow diagram). Excluded were survey reports, observational studies, case series, case reports and commentaries, with 8 remaining articles [16-23]. Of these four were excluded: two included patients with pain due to causes other than rheumatic diseases, one was an open-label study examining the effect of product delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9-THC) on experimentally induced pain, and the other was an open-label report of cannabis use in patients with fibromyalgia (FM) [16-19].

Characteristics of included studies

There were four controlled studies that met inclusion criteria, but as studies included patients with different rheumatic diseases and different products were used as treatments, the existing information did not allow for meta-analysis, and therefore is reported only as a qualitative (narrative) review. The four studies comprised 201 patients with rheumatic diseases, of which 58 patients had rheumatoid arthritis (RA), 71 had fibromyalgia (FM) and 74 were diagnosed with osteoarthritis (OA). A single study examined the effect of nabiximols in RA, two studies examined nabilone in FM, and one study reported on the effect of a FAAH inhibitor in OA (Table 1). The single study of FAAH inhibitor was stopped at interim analysis for futility. For the remaining 3 completed trials, duration was from 5-8 weeks [20, 22, 23]. All 3 completed studies had at least two of the five key domains assessed as having a high risk of bias with the conclusion that all studies had an overall high risk of bias (Table 2).

Specific cannabinoid preparations

Nabiximols
A single study examined the effect of nabiximols, phytocannabinoids extracted from cannabis and supplied as an oromucosal spray, compared to placebo in RA [20]. This study had a high risk of bias for 3 of the five key domains assessing risk for bias. In this double blind randomized trial of 58 patients with RA, over a 5-week period, improvements in pain, sleep quality and 28-joint

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Disease Activity Score were observed. A total of 4 patients withdrew from the study, 1 from the active group for an unrelated surgery, and 3 from the placebo group due to adverse events (2 serious not further characterized, 1 not described). Adverse events were more commonly reported for the active treatment, with dizziness in 26%, dry mouth in 13%, light-headedness in 11% and nausea and falls in 6%, with less frequent reports of constipation, arthritic pain and headache. Constipation and malaise was identified as severe for each of the 2 patients in the active group reporting this adverse effect.

There have been no RCTs of nabiximols in patients with other inflammatory rheumatic condition, OA, soft tissue rheumatism or FM.

Nabilone

There are two trials of nabilone for the treatment of symptoms of FM that included a total of 71 patients [22, 23]. In the first study of 40 FM patients observed over an 8-week period, with a 4-week active treatment phase, nabilone was associated with statistical improvement in pain and the quality of life measurement, the fibromyalgia impact questionnaire (FIQ) [22]. Nabilone was initiated at 0.5mg at bedtime and could be titrated up to 1mg twice a day. Seven patients withdrew from the study, 5 in the treatment group (2 without reason, 2 dizziness, and /or disorientation, nausea and headache, 1 drowsiness and fatigue) and 2 in the placebo group (1 without a reason, 1 headache). Risk for bias was assessed as high for 2 of 5 key domains assessing bias. With no differences in effect observed between the groups at the 2 week assessment, the treatment group showed statistically improved pain and FIQ at 4 weeks. Side effects were more common for the active treatment group throughout the study period, with drowsiness reported by almost half on active treatment, dry mouth in a third, vertigo and ataxia in a fifth, and fewer reporting confusion, poor concentration, headache, anorexia and dysphoria or euphoria. There were no serious adverse events reported for the study.

The second study was a randomized, double-blind, crossover study examining the effect of nabilone compared to amitriptyline on sleep disturbance in 31 FM patients [23]. Conducted over a 6-week period, with each subject receiving each drug for a two week period with a two week washout, non-inferiority of nabilone compared to amitriptyline was observed for some sleep measures. Nabilone was initiated at 0.5mg/day with option to increase to 1mg/day, and amitriptyline was initiated at 10mg/day with option to increase to 20mg. Three patients withdrew from the study, 1 for noncompliance with study protocol, 1 for lack of effect and 1 for side effects of edema, dizziness, nausea and insomnia after a single dose. Risk of bias was high for 2 of the 5 key domains assessed. With both agents showing a positive effect on sleep, nabilone showed a marginal advantage when sleep was assessed by the Insomnia Severity Index, but not for the Leeds Sleep Evaluation Questionnaire [23]. There were no significant differences between treatments for effect on pain or quality of life. Adverse events of dizziness, drowsiness, nausea and dry mouth were more frequently reported in the nabilone treatment group. There were no serious adverse events.

There have been no studies of nabilone in patients with inflammatory rheumatic conditions, OA or soft tissue rheumatism.

Fatty acid amide hydrolase (FAAH) inhibitor

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A single study in 74 patients with OA examined the effect of a FAAH inhibitor, PF-04457845, compared to naproxen as an active comparator [21]. This study was stopped at the interim analysis for futility. While naproxen showed reduction in pain compared to placebo, the FAAH1 inhibitor did not demonstrate difference from placebo, although the agent was well tolerated with a safety profile similar to placebo. There have been no studies of any similar agent used in inflammatory rheumatic conditions, soft tissue rheumatism or FM.

Dronabinol
There have been no studies of dronabinol in patients with any rheumatic disease.

Herbal cannabis
There have been no studies of herbal cannabis administered in any form in patients with any rheumatic disease.

Discussion
This systematic review has revealed a dearth of studies examining the effects of cannabinoids in a small number of patients with rheumatic diseases. Amongst a vast array of rheumatic conditions, cannabinoid effects have only been studied in RA, FM and OA, with the latter study prematurely terminated due to lack of efficacy. All studies included in this analysis were assessed as having a high risk of bias, with particular note that all studies comprised extremely low numbers of participants leading to the possibility that results may be completely random. While statistical improvements in pain and effect on sleep were observed, troublesome quasi neurological side effects of altered perception, dizziness, and drowsiness, as well as gastrointestinal effects were common. With only pharmaceutical preparations studied to date, and without any formal study of herbal cannabis preparations, no comment can be made regarding effects for herbal cannabis preparations in patients with rheumatic diseases. Based on the GRADE approach, there is low-quality evidence suggesting that cannabinoids may be associated with improvements in pain and sleep quality in RA and FM.

Clinical positive effects for the studies assessed in this review must be balanced by the reported adverse events. For the study of nabiximols in RA, the selected primary outcome measure of improved morning pain on movement was achieved, as well as some other secondary outcome measures of morning pain at rest, sleep quality and a global disease activity score, but measures of pain intensity were unchanged [20]. The authors further stated that although the differences observed were small and also variable across the population, they represent "benefits of clinical relevance". These selected measurements of change in pain and sleep quality are unique and not the usual standard for measurements of pain response or change in sleep. Other than limited demographic information, no other information is provided regarding RA disease status such as duration of disease, or concomitant treatments for disease modification or pain management, which further complicates interpretation of results. Similarly, the two studies of nabilone effect in FM, while reaching statistical significance may have less clinical meaningful effect when efficacy and side effects are weighed simultaneously [22, 23]. Although reported as significant, a 1.43cm change in pain from baseline (on the 10cm visual analogue scale), and a 10.76 (16%) change for the FIQ, are of questionable meaningful clinical effect [22]. The 16% reduction in

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FIQ total score does however exceed the reported minimally important difference for a change of 14% in the FIQ total score [24]. In the second study, nabilone had a marginally better effect on sleep compared to amitriptyline, but with effects on pain, mood and quality of life that were similar, but not superior, to those observed for amitriptyline [23].

Adverse events related to pharmaceutically prepared cannabinoid treatments were common, but although not serious, may be sufficiently troubling to impact wellbeing. For all three studies, between a quarter to a half of subjects reported side effects with quasi neurological effects of dizziness, drowsiness, and some form of cognitive effect reported for all. Gastrointestinal effects of dry mouth, nausea and constipation were also reported in each of the studies. The frequency of side effects noted in the placebo-controlled study of nabilone prompted the authors to suggest that a gradual introduction and titration of nabilone should be considered for future studies [22]. It is however reassuring to note that there were no active treatment-related serious adverse events reported for any of the studies.

Two recent systematic reviews that examined the effect of cannabinoids for treatment of chronic non-cancer pain, reported superiority of cannabinoids to placebo for analgesic effect, with some studies also showing improvement in sleep [25, 26]. Notably, neuropathic pain was the most commonly identified pain mechanism, rather than a specific musculoskeletal complaint. It is however increasingly appreciated that many musculoskeletal pain conditions have a considerable overlap of neuropathic pain mechanisms [27]. Any therapeutic effect must however be balanced with adverse effects, with numbers needed to harm (NNH) calculated to be between 5 and 8 for events affecting motor function, altered perception and altered cognition, emphasizing the narrow therapeutic window associated with currently available pharmaceutically prepared cannabinoid treatments.

There are no RTCs examining the effect of herbal cannabis in patients with rheumatic diseases. The lack of research using herbal cannabis may be attributed to the contentious status of cannabis as a highly controlled substance, with strong restrictions to access for research purposes, and as such access to herbal cannabis for therapeutic use has been primarily driven by patient-led initiatives at the legal and political levels. Physicians are therefore reliant on extrapolation from studies in other conditions. Information about herbal cannabis for the management of rheumatic complaints may be derived from small population surveys of persons with chronic pain conducted in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia [3-5]. Musculoskeletal or arthritis complaints by self-report are identified for between 15% to almost 40% of subjects, with variable outcome measures used. A single study reported dosing of 2 grams of herbal cannabis use a day for about 40% subjects, but without report of concomitant treatments for any of the studies [3-5]. Although these studies did not disaggregate respondents reporting rheumatic conditions, across all three studies the vast majority of patients perceived herbal cannabis to be therapeutically effective. Recreational use of cannabis either before medicinal use or concurrent was common for all three studies. Therefore on the strength of the evidence for the published literature, no conclusions for efficacy or safety of herbal cannabis in rheumatic conditions can be made. However, the safety profile of cannabis may compare favorably to current available therapies to treat rheumatic pain.

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In sum there is currently no sound evidence on which to base any recommendation for use of cannabinoids for symptom relief in the rheumatic conditions. As one may expect, this lack of evidence translates into the lack of confidence expressed by Canadian rheumatologists regarding their knowledge of cannabinoids in general [13]. In light of the extensive scientific but limited clinical evidence, patients may have numerous reasons to advocate for use of cannabinoids in general and herbal cannabis in particular. These include the poor performance for current available pain therapies, scepticism about the pharmaceutical industry, anecdotal and media reports attesting to the efficacy of herbal cannabis, familiarity with the agent because of past recreational use, and knowledge that cannabis has been used for millennia for various reasons including medicinal relief.

Findings on efficacy and tolerability issues can also be found in uncontrolled trials of cannabinoids. Problems with tolerability are however commonly reported for all current analgesic agents. In a study of nine FM patients, orally administered Δ^9-THC reduced electrically induced pain as well as daily pain report, with five of the nine subjects withdrawing due to treatment related side effects [17]. In a second uncontrolled study comparing FM patients who used (28 patients) or did not use cannabis (28 patients) for therapeutic effect, users reported reduction in pain scores two hours after herbal cannabis use [19]. Whether patients were regular users of medicinal cannabis, or nonusers did not influence measurements of function by the Short Form 36 Health Survey physical component summary score or the FIQ at baseline [19] .

Limitations and strengths
The conclusions of this systematic review for cannabinoid use in rheumatology practice are limited by the weakness of the evidence available. While four RCTs were identified, the studies were extremely small, of short duration and only included patients with RA, FM and OA. Small sample size introduces a high risk of bias for all 3 completed studies and represents the most important limiting factor for interpretation of the results. There has only been a single study that has examined the effect of modulation of the endocannabinoid system in a homogenous patient group with knee OA, without any difference from placebo for either efficacy or side effects [21]. Our search strategy was comprehensive and conducted by a qualified librarian to ensure that all the current available studies were accessed.

Conclusion and implications for practice, policy or future research
In view of the considerable limitations of the studies examined in this review, including small sample sizes, short duration, only modest efficacy and a high rate of mild to moderate adverse effects, it is not currently possible to recommend this category of treatments as therapy for patients with rheumatic diseases. Any conclusions based on these studies remain tenuous and call for larger, well controlled clinical trials to better understand potential benefits and risks as pertaining to rheumatic conditions. In addition, the absence of any study of herbal cannabis in rheumatic diseases precludes any recommendation for use, with particular policy implications as governments worldwide, responding to patient demand for access, are expanding the authorized medical use of herbal cannabis, with rheumatic diseases commonly cited as a reason for use. Further research is clearly needed to improve our understanding of the therapeutic potential and limitations of cannabinoids for the treatment of rheumatic disorders.

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Figure 1: Medline search strategy for systematic review of cannabinoid effects in rheumatic diseases

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1   exp Cannabaceae/
2   Endocannabinoids/
3   exp Receptors, Cannabinoid/
4   exp Cannabinoid Receptor Modulators/
5   exp Cannabinoids/
6   Marijuana Smoking/
7   (cannab$ or mari?uana$ or cannador or bhang$ or ganja$ or has?hi?h$ or hemp or c indica or charas).mp.
8   endocannabinoid$.mp.
9   (sativex or nabiximol$ or gw1000 or gw-1000 or sab-378 or sab378).mp.
10   phytocannab$.mp.
11   ((CB1 or CB2) adj2 receptor$).mp.
12   (nabilone or nabidiolex or dimethylcannab$ or methylcannab$ or cesamet$ or "109514").mp.
13   (hydroxydronabinol or dronabinol or tetrahydrocannabinol or tetrahydrocannabinol or carboxytetrahydrocannabinol or thc or ea1477 or ea-1477 or marinol or qcd84924 or qcd-84924 or tetranabinex or jwh133 or jwh-133 or sp-104).mp.
14   (arachidon?ylglycerol or (arachidon$ adj2 glycerol)).mp.
15   (alujemic acid$ or ct3 or ct-3 or ip751 or ip-751).mp.
16   (anandamide or virodamine or arachidon?ylethanolamide or methanandamide or am356 or am-356).mp.
17   (oleoylethanolami?e or (ethanolami?e adj2 oleoyl)).mp.
18   (de?acetyllevonantradol or nantradol$ or levonantradol$ or cp50556 or cp505561 or cp-50556 or cp-505561 or cp44001 or cp440011 or cp-44001 or cp-440011).mp.
19   ((cp44 or cp-44) adj2 "001").mp.
20   ((cp50 or cp-50) adj2 "556").mp.
21   (dexanabinol$ or hu-211 or hu-210 or hu211 or hu210).mp.
22   (noladin or hu310 or hu-310).mp.
23   (palmidrol or impulsin or palmitoylethanolamide).mp.
24   fatty acid amid$.mp.
25   FAAH.mp.
26   or/1-25
27   Rheumatology/
28   Collagen Diseases/

9   Connective Tissue Diseases/
0   Joint Diseases/
1   Musculoskeletal Diseases/
2   Bone diseases/
3   Musculoskeletal System/
4   Muscular Diseases/
5   Rheumatic Diseases/
6   exp Arthritis, Rheumatoid/
7   Fibromyalgia/
8   exp Osteoarthritis/
9   Hyperostosis/
0   Ossification of Posterior Longitudinal Ligament/
1   Calcinosis/
2   Ossification, Heterotopic/
3   Polymyalgia Rheumatica/
4   exp Spondylosis/
5   exp Spinal Osteophytosis/
6   exp Spondylitis/
7   exp Back Pain/
8   Neck Pain/
9   Neck/
0   exp Joints/
1   Pain/
2   49 and 51
3   50 and 51
4   exp Musculoskeletal Pain/
5   exp Arthralgia/
6   Arthritis/
7   exp Lupus Erythematosus, Systemic/
8   Scleroderma, Localized/
9   exp Scleroderma, Systemic/
0   exp Myositis/
1   Sacroiliitis/
2   Joint Instability/
3   Ligaments, Articular/
4   30 and 63
5   rheuma?t$.tw.
6   (collagen$ adj2 (disease$1 or condition$ or disorder$1 or syndrome$1)).tw.
7   collagenos?s.tw.
8   (connective tissue$ adj2 (disease$1 or condition$ or disorder$1 or syndrome$1

or defect or dysplasia)).tw.

9   ((joint$1 or articula$) adj2 (disease$1 or condition$ or disorder$1 or syndrome$1 or pain$ or ache$ or defect or deformit$ or instabilit$ or hypermobilit$ or hyper-mobilit$ or laxit$ or lax or hyperextensibilit$ or hyper-extensibilit$)).tw.

0   ((bone$ or muscul$) adj2 (disease$1 or condition$ or disorder$1 or syndrome$1 or pain$ or ache$ or hypertroph$)).tw.

1   still$ disease$1.tw.

2   ((caplan or felty$ or sjo?gren$ or sicca) adj2 syndrome$1).tw.

3   (fibrom?algi$ or fibrositi$).tw.

4   (myofascial adj2 pain$).tw.

5   (arthriti$ or osteoarthr$ or polyarthr$ or arthralgia or arthropath$).tw.

6   (Longitudinal Ligament$ adj2 (ossif$ or calcif$)).tw.

7   (Forestier or Certonciny or polymyalgia or poly-myalgia or peri-extra-articular or pseudopolyarthriti$).tw.

8   spondylo$.tw.

9   ((spine or spinal or lumbar) adj2 (osteophytos?s or osteo-phytos?s or tuberculos?s)).tw.

0   hyperostos?s.tw.

1   (spondyliti$ or dis?iti$ or spondyl?arthriti$ or spondyl?arthropath$).tw.

2   (reiter$ adj2 (syndrome$1 or disease$1)).tw.

3   (pott$1 adj2 (disease$1 or paraplegia)).tw.

4   ((back or vertebr$) adj2 pain$).tw.

5   (backache$1 or back ache$1).tw.

6   lumbago$.tw.

7   ((neck or cervical) adj2 (pain$ or ache$)).tw.

8   (cervicalgia$1 or cervicod?nia$1 or neckache$1).tw.

9   ((wrist$1 or hand$1 or elbow$1 or shoulder$1 or spin$2 or knee$1 or hip$1 or ankle$1 or f??t) adj2 (pain$ or ache$)).tw.

0   (lupus or libman-sack$1).tw.

1   (scleroderma$1 or dermatosclerosis or dermato-sclerosis or morphea$1).tw.

2   (systemic adj2 scleros?s).tw.

3   ((CREST or CRST) adj2 syndrome$1).tw.

4   calcinos$.tw.

5   (inflammat$ adj2 (myopath$ or muscle disease$1)).tw.

6   Fibrodysplasia Ossificans.tw.

7   (inclusion body adj2 myopath$).tw.

8   (myositi$ or dermatomyositi$ or dermatopolymyositi$ or polymyositi$ or pyomyositi$).tw.

9   (sacroiliiti$ or sacro-iliiti$).tw.

00 ((hypermobility or hyper-mobility) adj2 (syndrome$1 or disease$1)).tw.

01   27 or 28 or 29 or 30 or 31 or 32 or 33 or 34 or 35 or 36 or 37 or 38 or 39 or 40 or 41 or 42 or 43 or 44 or 45 or 46 or 47 or 48 or 52 or 53 or 54 or 55 or 56 or 57 or 58 or 59 or 60 or 61 or 62 or 64 or 65 or 66 or 68 or 69 or 70 or 71 or 72 or 73 or 74 or 75 or 76 or 77 or 78 or 79 or 80 or 81 or 82 or 83 or 84 or 85 or 86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92 or 93 or 94 or 95 or 96 or 97 or 98 or 99 or 100

02   26 and 101

03   exp clinical trial/ or randomi?ed.tw. or placebo$.tw. or dt.fs. or randomly.tw. or trial$1.tw. or group$1.tw.

04   102 and 103

05   limit 104 to animals

06   limit 105 to humans

07   105 not 106

08   104 not 107

09   remove duplicates from 108

Figure 2.
PRISMA Flow Diagram

```
┌─────────────────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Records identified through │   │  Additional records         │
│  database searching         │   │  identified through other   │
│  (n =2230)                  │   │  sources (n =660)           │
└──────────────┬──────────────┘   └──────────────┬──────────────┘
               │                                  │
               └──────────────┬───────────────────┘
                              ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
              │  Records after duplicates removed │
              │  (n =1663)                        │
              └──────────────┬───────────────────┘
                             ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────┐
              │  Records screened        │─────▶│  Records excluded        │
              │  (n =1663)               │      │  (n =1641  )             │
              └──────────────┬───────────┘      └──────────────────────────┘
                             ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────┐
              │  Full-text articles      │─────▶│  Full-text articles      │
              │  assessed for            │      │  excluded, with reasons  │
              │  eligibility             │      │  (n=18)                  │
              │  (n =22  )               │      │                          │
              └──────────────┬───────────┘      │  Review article n=7      │
                             ▼                   │  Not RCT n=2             │
              ┌──────────────────────────┐      │  Survey report n=4       │
              │  Studies included in     │      │  Other pain conditions   │
              │  qualitative synthesis   │      │  n=4                     │
              │  (n = 4 )                │      │  Observational study n=1 │
              └──────────────┬───────────┘      └──────────────────────────┘
                             ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────┐
              │  Studies included in     │
              │  quantitative synthesis  │
              │  (meta-analysis)         │
              │  (n =  0 )               │
              └──────────────────────────┘
```
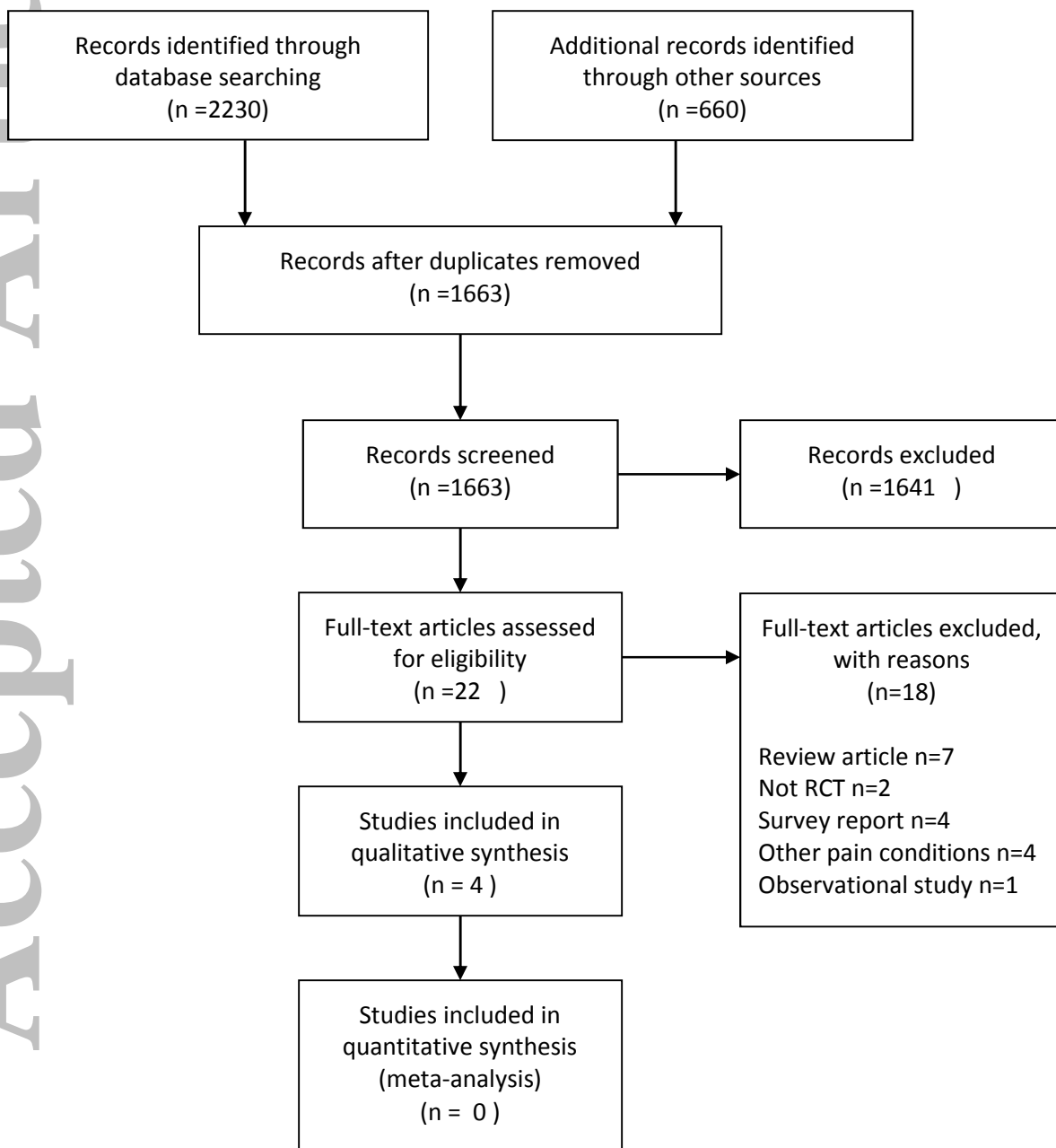
Table 1. RCTs assessing cannabinoids in the treatment of rheumatic conditions

Author (date)	Agent (control group)	Population	Outcome measure	Duration treatment	Efficacy	Safety	Comments and risk of bias
Blake *et al.* (2006)	Nabiximols (placebo)	Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) (n=58)	Primary: - Morning pain on movement (VAS) Secondary: - Morning pain at rest (VAS) - Sleep quality (VAS) - Morning stiffness (VAS) - SF-MPQ - DAS28	5 weeks	Improved pain on movement, pain at rest, sleep quality, DAS28 and SF-MPQ	2 serious AEs in placebo group No withdrawals due to AEs in treatment group Dizziness, dry mouth, light headed, nausea, falls	~~JADAD 3~~High risk of bias No comment regarding RA disease modifying treatment
Skrabek *et al.* (2008)	Nabilone 0.5-1mg bid (placebo)	Fibromyalgia (FM) (n=40)	Primary: - Pain (10-cm VAS) Secondary: - Tender points - Tender point threshold - FIQ depression - FIQ fatigue - FIQ anxiety - FIQ total score	8 weeks	Improved pain, FIQ anxiety and FIQ total score	No serious AEs 3 withdrawals due to AEs in treatment group Drowsiness, dry mouth, vertigo, cognitive effects	~~JADAD 3~~High risk of bias No difference from placebo at 2weeks
Ware *et al.* (2010)	Nabilone 0.5-1mg (amitriptyline 10-20mg)	Fibromyalgia (FM) (n=3~~1~~2)	Primary: - Quality of sleep (ISI and LSEQ) Secondary: - MPQ - Profile of Mood State - FIQ - Global satisfaction with treatment	2 weeks each study period and 2 weeks washout	Improved ISI No differences for LSEQ, MPQ, mood, FIQ	No serious AEs 1 withdrawal due to AE in treatment group Dizziness, drowsiness, nausea, dry mouth	~~JADAD 5~~High risk of bias Nabilone judged non inferior to amitriptyline~~.~~
Huggins *et al.* (2012)	PF-04457845* (placebo or naproxen 500mg bid vs. placebo)	Osteoarthritis knee (n=74)	- WOMAC pain - WOMAC stiffness - WOMAC physical function - WOMAC total score - Daily pain - Use of rescue medication	2 weeks	Study stopped at interim analysis due to futility	No serious AEs	~~JADAD 4~~Risk of bias not applicable as ~~S~~study stopped at interim due to futility

*irreversible fatty acid amide hydrolase-1 inhibitor PF-04457845

AE adverse events, DAS28 28-joint disease activity score, FIQ Fibromyalgia Impact Questionnaire, ISI Insomnia Severity Index, LSEQ Leeds Sleep evaluation Questionnaire, SF-MPQ Short form McGill Pain Questionnaire, VAS visual analogue scale, WOMAC Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Osteoarthritis Index.

Table 2. Risk of bias assessment for randomized controlled trials of cannabinoids for rheumatic diseases

	Blake	Ware	Skrabek	Huggins
Random sequence	Low	Low	Unclear	Low
Allocation concealment	Unclear	Low	Low	Low
Blinding outcome	High	Unclear	Unclear	Low
Incomplete outcome data	High	High	High	Not applicable
Size	High	High	High	High