

Spotlight on Medical Cannabis Wellness Center

In this installment of Practice Spotlight, we shine a light on the unique model of care created by medical cannabis trailblazers Leslie Apgar, MD, and Gina Dubbé at Greenhouse Wellness in Ellicott City, Maryland.

The medical cannabis dispensary Greenhouse Wellness (GW) in Ellicott City, Maryland, practices like a residency program and includes an on-staff physician, nurses, and wellness consultants who receive formalized training using best practices.

“If you want to take cannabis seriously, then it needs to be approached as medicine, and we just didn’t see anybody else doing that,” said Leslie Apgar, MD, Medical Director of GW, who co-founded the medical cannabis dispensary in 2017 with Gina Dubbé, a venture capitalist and entrepreneur with a master’s degree in engineering.

Unique Model of Care

GW’s unique model of care is what sets it apart. It seamlessly blends aspects of conventional Western medicine—such as a residency model of training and an on-site medical director—with Eastern medicine—a focus on wellness and prevention.

In the short time since GW opened, it has received numerous accolades and is already considered a physician referral center for pain management specialists in the area, as well as for physicians nationwide. In fact, the medical cannabis practice saw 24,000 patients in 2019, with an average of 70 patients per day.

Pain is the main reason that patients present to GW, followed by anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. Other conditions include sexual dysfunction, multiple sclerosis, tremors, and seizure disorders. The patient population is slightly more women than men, with the average age of approximately 50 years.

“Typically, we are known as the place where physicians send their patients to be cared for,” Dr. Apgar said. Interestingly, Dr. Apgar did not initially receive support from her physician friends and colleagues when she sought to open the dispensary, underscoring the stigma surrounds cannabis medicine. “I would get comments like, ‘You’re throwing your career away. What are you doing?’ Now these physicians are either coming in as patients or sending me their loved ones.”

Training and Education

The practice functions as a residency program with Dr. Apgar serving as the attending physician and training “chief residents,” who then train the “junior residents, interns, and medical students,” otherwise known as cannabis wellness consultants. Questions or concerns from staff members are directed to GW’s nurses or senior staff members, and ultimately Dr. Apgar.



Inside the medical dispensary at Greenhouse Wellness in Ellicott City, Maryland.

“Our dispensary has a very collegiate, collaborative environment,” explained Dr. Apgar. All GW staff receive formalized training in the medicine behind cannabis and best practices.

“We have an employee training manual that goes over the basics, including what cannabis is and its medicinal qualities, how to conduct a patient interview, dosing strategies, pharmacology, etc,” Dr. Apgar said.

Additionally, all staff read *The Medical Marijuana Guide: Cannabis and Your Health* by Patricia Frye, MD, and take a quiz afterward. Each month, the team is given reading assignments, much like a journal club, followed by a quiz. New hires shadow Dr. Apgar in practice, followed by other senior consultants. The learning curve is steep, Dr. Apgar noted, but the emphasis on education results in highly trained staff.

“I do consults, but when it comes to recommending the products, the wellness consultants outshine me every day,” Dr. Apgar said.

“Sometimes, I will go in, much as in residency, and start pimping, putting the consultants on the spot,” Dr. Apgar said. “Sometimes we do role playing, where I pretend to be a patient and I have them tell me what they would do in a certain situation.”

Women’s Health and Cannabis Medicine

Dr. Apgar’s 17-year practice as a board-certified obstetrician and gynecologist (OB/GYN) prepared her for the trial-and-error approach that is typically needed in cannabis medicine. “OB/GYNs don’t necessarily wait to enact change because they’ve got 2 lives at stake. Nothing in the practice of obstetrics was ever FDA approved for babies, so I was trained to make the best decisions and to take care of the patient’s best interest at all times.”

Her clinical worlds often intersect when women with complicated gynecology cases present to her seeking cannabis treatment for chronic pain.

“The cross-section of my career path has been strange,” Dr. Apgar said. She often feels that “there is not a single person on the planet earth who could have been better equipped to deal with these complicated gynecology patients at this particular moment.”

This career intersection led Dr. Apgar and Ms. Dubbé to develop their proprietary brand Blissiva, which is directed toward women and has various cannabidiol (CBD) to low delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) ratios. Dr. Apgar noted that many products on the market are off-putting toward women. Other products in the Blissiva line are popular with both men and women and offer a 1:1 CBD:THC ratio for anxiety and sleep with terpene



Leslie Apgar, MD (left), Medical Director and on-site physician, opened Greenhouse Wellness in 2017 with Gina Dubbé (right), venture capitalist, entrepreneur, and licensed professional engineer.

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—Leslie Apgar, MD

ratios to give a relaxing effect. Another product for pain has a 3:1 ratio with a different terpene blend to reduce sedating effects so patients can function during the day.

Compared with a conventional doctor’s office, Dr. Apgar finds that GW’s dispensary setting allows patients to be more honest about their previous or current cannabis use and with transparency, better healing can occur.

“Sometimes, they tell me their deepest, darkest feelings, or information that they don’t want put in their chart, but that helps me individualize their treatment,” she said.

Individualized Treatment

Start low and go slow is the typical focus of medical treatment at GW, particularly in elderly patients. Dosage is individualized based on patient age, medical history, cannabis experience, and route of administration.

Although some literature suggests an initial THC dose of 2.5 or 5 mg,¹ Dr. Apgar suggests initiating treatment at an even lower dose—such as one drop of a tincture—in an elderly patient who is cannabis-naïve. She then titrates up “cautiously and carefully.”

On the other end of the spectrum is a 60-year-old patient who has smoked cannabis every day for years. “I’m going to start him at a

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higher dose depending on route of administration,” Dr. Apgar said. “He could probably tolerate a higher concentration of THC and a flower, but maybe in an edible. I would definitely start him at 5 mg and then may go up higher to treat a pain condition, for example.”

In terms of drug–drug interactions, “the safest advice I give patients and my staff is to separate the cannabis dose by 2 hours from any other medications [patients] are taking,” Dr. Apgar said. The staff are educated on important drug–drug interactions, such as use of cannabis in combination with blood thinners.

“Our focus is on quality and safety first and foremost,” Dr. Apgar said, adding that stringent testing regulations in Maryland ensure product safety. Products are tested at the grow level, at the processor, and at dispensaries.

Advice on Starting a Medical Dispensary

“The key to starting a medical dispensary is surrounding yourself with people who know what they’re doing to fill in where your inadequacies might be in terms of running a business, because doctors are not typically good business people,” Dr. Apgar told *AJEM*. Medical school does not readily prepare physicians to run their own business, “which is a complete oversight and needs to change,” she said.

Even in states where medical cannabis is legal, many banks steer clear of cannabis businesses because of the fear of violating federal law regarding cannabis.¹ Fortunately, this was not an obstacle for Greenhouse Wellness.

“We were really lucky because Severn Bank agreed to let a certain number of cannabis businesses bank with them,” Dr. Apgar said. “The fees are high, there is no interest, and we can’t write checks, but we have a safe and secure place to deposit the money, and we are grateful for that.”

Finding physical space for the dispensary was much more challenging, as many potential landlords were distrustful, and many large leasing companies are headquartered across the state line or use banks with branches across the state line, Dr. Apgar said.

Ultimately, Dr. Apgar advised health care practitioners interested in entering the medical cannabis field to “be passionate and as long as you have a clear goal in mind about what you want to do, you’ll get there. ... Wake up every day with that goal in your in mind.”

Reference

Parker KA, Di Mattia A, Shaik F, Ortega J, Whittle R. Risk management within the cannabis industry: Building a framework for the cannabis industry. *Financial Markets, Inst Inst.* 2019;28(1):3-55.



Gina Dubbé (left) and Leslie Apgar, MD (right)

CBD Shortage Affects Treatment

Dr. Apgar worries about the growing market in Maryland, where there is currently a shortage of plants that are high in CBD, with most growers focusing on plants that are higher in THC.

The lack of access to high CBD products “is a problem already, and we are in a medical state. Can you imagine what’s going to happen when our state approves recreational use?” Dr. Apgar said more growers are needed in Maryland as the current 15 growers are not able to meet the demand.

Dr. Apgar’s 17-year practice as a board-certified obstetrician and gynecologist prepared her for the trial-and-error approach that is typically needed in cannabis medicine.

“I know that growers are trying to increase their square footage, and they are actively working toward that end,” she said, adding that she has great relationships with most of these growers. “Theoretically, we will have another 4 growers coming online at some point, but as in many states, these grower and processor awards are fraught with lawsuits and are difficult to get up and running. It is depressing that CBD has to be a niche grow or a boutique grow but, maybe that is what it’s going to take.”

The Patient Experience

New patients who present to GW with medical cannabis cards are asked to complete a state-mandated form on diversion, and then are able to access the dispensary where wellness consultants will take a medical history, including previous cannabis use and current pharmacotherapies, and ask patients what they hope to gain from cannabis treatment. New patients also have the option of booking a complementary 30-minute appointment with Dr. Apgar or a wellness consultant in a private conference room. Patients are educated on the various forms of cannabis that are available and are given patient education, if needed, to dispel any misconceptions regarding cannabis treatment.

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