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Synopsis

Cannabidiol as a treatment for patients who are clinically at high risk of developing psychosis: learnings from the CANTOP-RCT

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Psychosis is often preceded by a clinical high-risk state, when people have similar but shorter-lasting and less severe experiences than people with fully developed psychosis. As fully developed psychosis causes a great deal of suffering to patients and their families, there is growing interest in treating people at the clinical high-risk stage. However, current treatments for people in the clinical high-risk state do not work very well and are also not tolerated very well. Hence, at the moment, most people in a clinical high-risk state presenting to the National Health Service typically receive practical help and support from clinicians to address current issues. Cannabidiol, a naturally available chemical found in extracts of the cannabis plant, seems to be a promising candidate. However, we do not know whether cannabidiol treatment will actually be useful in relieving symptoms in clinical high-risk state patients. We received funding to test this in a large clinical trial comparing cannabidiol to placebo (a sugar pill with no active ingredient). We aimed to study 300 clinical high-risk state patients. Half of them were supposed to receive the same dose of cannabidiol (600 mg/day) that we have used before and the other half were supposed to receive a matching dummy capsule. Neither the researchers nor the patients were supposed to know what each person received during the study. At the end of 6-month treatment, we wanted to examine whether those who received cannabidiol were significantly better compared to those who received the sugar pill. We also aimed to use brain scanning in a subgroup of people (50 from each treatment group) to understand how cannabidiol might work. However, despite our best efforts, it was challenging to find a supply of high-quality cannabidiol for the trial. The COVID pandemic also posed challenges. As a result, the study was closed down before the trial could even start.