

Press Release:

November 9, 2021 – Vancouver Island, BC - My Community Journeys announced today that they recently hosted the first legal group therapy session with psilocybin mushrooms ever in North America. My Community Journeys is an independent non-profit collaborative of healthcare professionals on Vancouver Island. The team was drawn from Roots to Thrive (RTT), an innovative ketamine assisted psychotherapy program, affiliated with Vancouver Island University (VIU).

The multidisciplinary team made up of experienced medical practitioners facilitated the psilocybin-assisted therapy at no cost for nine end-of-life patients who qualified for section 56 exemptions under the Canada's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA). Program officials had been waiting on the final exemption from Health Canada which was granted just three hours prior to the first session.

“It was stressful waiting on that last exemption,” says Dr. Valorie Masuda, a palliative care physician and team member. “But we believed in the process and worked with Health Canada to ensure all measures and parameters were in place to provide a safe and compassionate experience for these nine participants.”

The RTT team has had exceptional results delivering a 12-week, resiliency-based, ketamine-assisted therapy program (RTT-KAT), primarily serving healthcare providers with treatment-resistant depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Through VIU, the team plans to evaluate the outcomes and to mentor interdisciplinary healthcare teams to provide psychedelic-assisted therapy within a community of practice/group support model.

This experience catalyzed RTT to develop the current psilocybin-assisted group therapy program for patients with end-of-life distress through an affiliate, My Community Journeys non-profit, program.

Dr. Shannon Dames, RN a resilience researcher from Vancouver Island University (VIU), states that, “To thrive, humans need meaning, purpose and connection. When these basic needs are met, we can shift our experience of distress and despair. This experience, using the RTT community of practice model for psilocybin-assisted therapy, underscores the value of healing in relationship with others.”

“This team is demonstrating that skilled and experienced professionals are able to provide these therapies in a way that is heart-based and inclusive across cultures and belief systems, enabling all people to feel seen and loved with the highest integrity”, Dr. Gail Peekeekoot, RN, experienced psychedelic-assisted guide, celebrant, and team member.

Prior to participating in the group medicine session with the support of experienced guides and clinicians, all nine patients met for three weeks as a group, enabling them to show up and share their hopes and fears. Afterwards, they integrated their experience in that community and shared their experiences, sometimes laughing, crying, and holding each other. Results and outcomes from the nine-patient psilocybin group therapy study will be shared publicly after it concludes in December 2021.

Existential distress is a common symptom among patients with terminal diagnoses, which can cause profound mental suffering for patients as well as their family and care providers. Well-versed in the studies and scientific literature on end-of-life distress, Masuda says her experience “with these beautiful souls was the most touching thing I have ever witnessed.”

Joanne Hall, a palliative care nurse and team member explains, “We wrap participants in compassion. This gives their body a chance to loosen its grip on suffering and fear, including but not exclusively, about their death.”

Marsha Bennett, a patient with the group therapy program, was deeply moved by the experience.

“I felt a depth of grace and healing. It took a tremendous amount of strength from this team to hold space so that I could feel safe and have that depth of experience. The strength and grace came from everyone else and it let me be so comfortable in my body. I felt freedom and liberation.”

Before psychedelic-assisted therapy, there have been few effective treatments for end-of-life distress. Many patients have chosen terminal sedation or Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) to alleviate mental suffering. Studies show that after a single psilocybin treatment in the appropriate relational setting, 80 percent of patients will experience relief for up to a year after treatment.

Another patient, Emily Charette, was able to connect spiritually with loved ones present and past.

“There was so much to take away. I met with so many friends and relatives on my journey yesterday. An overwhelming sense of the powerful roots of my ancestors, particularly women, who helped to hold myself up to be loved,”

Andrea Lemp, an experienced registered nurse in mental health administration and functional medicine was on the therapy team. She notes that the medicinal power of psychedelics helps bring calm and peace to those feeling isolated and alone during their cancer journey.

“We can find a place that is calm, secure and connected, providing an opportunity to feel a sense of peace that cannot be disrupted. This allows us to move through challenging times with a greater sense of inner security.”

Participant Shamus Birkel: “I have trauma to process around the cancer diagnosis - and all of the pain and suffering, and the intensity of the last year. I felt so grateful, in this experience, the gift of a place where none of the cancer has touched who I am. I am alive, and I do have a choice in how I get to meet life.”

Despite not yet being legal in Canada, the demand for therapeutic psilocybin mushroom therapy has skyrocketed. Because Canada’s healthcare system does not cover the therapy, many underground therapists are charging upwards of \$2,000 for a single session, something Masuda believes must be considered “as part of publicly funded primary health care, not just for those who can afford it.”

Dr. Crosbie Watler, a team member and psychiatrist, believes the progression of psychedelic therapy into mainstream mental healthcare is a “call to action for modern psychiatry.”

“We are in the throes of a mental health and substance use crisis, with record opioid deaths and record numbers on disability for mental disorders. Concurrently, there has been an exponential rise in the prescribing of psychotropic medications. With so many treatment-resistant patients, it’s time to admit that our medications are not so ‘anti’ after all. Perhaps our patients are not treatment resistant, perhaps we’re failing to use the appropriate treatments.”

Dr. Pamela Kryskow, the RTT medical lead and team member, notes “The safety of psilocybin mushrooms has been well established from millennia of use by Indigenous peoples across the globe and more recently from the clinical trials with psilocybin for participants at end-of-life at Johns Hopkins and New York Universities. Psilocybin has a better safety profile than nicotine and aspirin.”

Participant Chelle Sheehan: “This was way beyond what I expected. It couldn’t have happened without this group and how it all came together. I could go today, but it wouldn’t matter, it was so profound.”

Now that this historic milestone has been achieved, the team hopes that more Canadians with end-of-life-anxiety, and indeed many others who face emotional crises, can have access to these important medicines, with healing, harm reduction and safety foremost in mind.

The team would like to express their profound gratitude to former federal Minister of Health, The Honourable Patty Hajdu, and new minister, The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos and Health Canada staff for their support throughout the exemption process.