

Snake oil or cure-all?

CBD's star set to rise in the face of a pandemic



Herschel Maasdorp
CEO of Cannafica

The novel Coronavirus may have wiped out whole industries in the long tail of its economic cyclone, yet it has shaken up others, leaving them

ripe for the kind of innovation that only a crisis of this magnitude can catalyse.

One industry that is primed for exponential growth in the wake of the pandemic is that of cannabis, specifically cannabidiol (CBD).

According to the World Health Organization, CBD is generally well-tolerated with a good safety profile. It is non-psychoactive and exhibits no effects indicative of any abuse or dependence potential, and is renowned for its pain-relieving, anxiety-alleviating, and sleep-promoting properties.

Says Herschel Maasdorp, CEO of Cannafica, the soon-to-launch lifestyle cannabis brand of Labat Healthcare, "CBD's role in a time of Covid is becoming ever more prominent, if the international scene is anything to go by."

Alphagreen.io, a UK-based CBD marketplace,



recently revealed that spend on CBD products in Britain surpassed £150m in the first four months of 2020, putting the market on track to achieving a staggering 50% growth when compared to the previous year.

Some are touting this boom to be a side-effect of the wholly unsubstantiated belief in certain users that CBD could possibly alter the trajectory of the Covid-19 disease.

While one Canadian study titled 'In Search of Preventative Strategies: Novel Anti-Inflammatory

High-CBD Cannabis Sativa Extracts Modulate ACE2 Expression in Covid-19 Gateway Tissues' tentatively showed that certain strains of CBD may potentially lower the risk of contracting Covid-19, the lab conducting the study was quick to caveat that far more research was needed.

Maasdorp, however, cautions the industry against suggestions of this nature, and advises that merchants "be wary of

filling the vacuum of fear wrought by the pandemic with unfounded claims, which undermines our hard-won credibility; something that the industry is still battling to establish among certain stakeholder groups."

The South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) bars CBD companies from making claims that a product can 'diagnose', 'cure', 'treat', 'mitigate' or 'prevent' any medical conditions. These guidelines are in line with international guidelines, such as the Food and Drug

Administration (FDA), the United States' regulatory authority. In addition, CBD manufacturers and distributors are required to adhere to strict guidelines when developing marketing content related to CBD products, while Google's advertising policy still prohibits brands from promoting CBD products to online users.

Maasdorp admits that while certainly no cure for Corona, there's substantial evidence in support of CBD's anti-bacterial, anti-anxiety and anti-inflammatory properties, making it highly attractive in the midst of a global pandemic.

"Along with virtually every other business, the CBD industry took a knock during South Africa's initial hard lockdown in March, as consumer spending ground to a halt in the face of the proverbial rainy day, which had suddenly materialised. However, CBD retailers have since experienced a rapid recovery – particularly those with e-commerce platforms, as many consumers continue to give brick-and-mortar outlets a wide berth," he says.

He offers two reasons for this rising popularity. "Firstly, in a disease pandemic, wellness becomes a high-value currency. 'Self-care' has taken on a whole new meaning: having finally outgrown the sheet mask, it now encompasses the full spectrum of mental, emotional and physical health, cementing its place in society."

CBD has shown that it may contribute towards promoting homeostasis by boosting endocannabinoid activity, leading to a growth in demand as consumers seek to enhance their immunity.



Maasdorp says that the second reason for this growth is the sharp spike in conditions such as depression and anxiety across the country, "While wide-scale unemployment has risen around the globe, the deep fissures that already exist in our country's socio-economic fabric have been exacerbated by the pandemic."

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) recently reported that the number of calls to mental health and suicide hotlines had more than doubled since the beginning of lockdown, and were climbing every day.

"The post-COVID landscape is a fertile breeding ground for increased chronic stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol dependence, and self-harm." Stress management is an area where CBD shines.

One study that investigated cannabidiol as a potential treatment for anxiety disorders showed that systemically administered CBD lowered acute increases in heart rate and blood pressure. The compound also conclusively demonstrated its efficacy in mitigating anxiety-related behaviours relevant to multiple disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) and seasonal affective disorder (SAD), among others, with a notable lack of anxiogenic effects.

With consumers under mounting pressure, Maasdorp believes that CBD has a valuable role to play in a post-Covid world.

"This places an even greater responsibility on us, as an industry. It is vital that we avoid making unverified or grandiose claims. We must commit to ongoing education that will empower our customers, while adhering to the parameters laid out in the regulatory framework. Remaining transparent and ethically accountable will ensure our industry's long-term viability, in a world forever changed by this pandemic." **SR**