

Directions

Minimising the impact of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in our community

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

7 January 2015

There has been significant public interest in the ACT in relation to the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes. A public forum, held on 23 September in the Legislative Assembly, was co-hosted by ATODA, the Public Health Assoc. Australia and the AIDS Actions Council and attracted significant media attention. Pharmacological cannabinoids was also the subject of much discussion and some debate at the 7th Annual ATOD Sector conference on 24 September 2014.

The overwhelming majority of media, expert and public comment has been in support of cannabis being available for medicinal use, including the experience of patients with serious illnesses who have used cannabis to manage the symptoms or counter the side effects of other treatments. There has only been very limited reporting on the perceived potential harm that could result from making pharmacological cannabinoids available. This seems to be related to some confusion regarding the use of pharmacological cannabinoids and the recreational use of cannabis.

The main debate in the ACT has focussed on the relative merits and risks of making pharmacological cannabinoids available as soon as possible, or of a more prudent approach that entails further research and/or development of a regulatory structure, both of which are likely to delay access to cannabis as a potential treatment.

There is well documented evidence that pharmacological cannabinoids can have beneficial effects for a range of serious health conditions, including cancer, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy and HIV infection, particularly where first line treatments have proved ineffective or produce intolerable side effects. Symptoms that can be ameliorated include nausea and loss of appetite, muscle spasticity and some forms of chronic pain, and cannabis can be potentially be used to compliment traditional therapies or as an alternative treatment.

Issues that still need to be addressed include the supply chain for cannabis; quality control and dose related considerations e.g. optimal strength of THC and other active ingredients; current legislative barriers to further research; and potential cannabis regulation, for example by the Therapeutic Goods Administration, authorised conditions, development of a legal framework etc. Directions are of the opinion that there should be level playing fields with regard to the access to pharmacological cannabinoids and that people who require relief should not be disadvantaged or compromised in their efforts to procure pharmacological cannabinoids.

Directions unequivocally supports a compassionate approach to the use of pharmacological cannabinoids. Ultimately, however, decisions regarding when and how medical cannabis should be made available are best made by the relevant experts in the medical, pharmaceutical and related scientific fields. Directions

has reviewed the current client load and, based on current trends, is confident that increased use of cannabis for medicinal purposes will not have any significant effect on demand for Directions' services.

Fiona Trevelyan, CEO of Directions, is willing to appear before the Committee if requested.