

Inquiry into the use of Cannabis in Victoria

Mr Paul O'Donoghue

Organisation Name:

Your position or role:

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this Inquiry into the use of Cannabis in Victoria to consider::

Education,Criminal activity,Public health,Mental health,Accessing and using cannabis,Young people and children,Public safety,Social impacts

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Individual,other – please explain

Working in Cannabis retail in Canada

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

Ensuring equitable access to the product for consumers, ensuring equitable access to the market for growers and businesses

Select all that apply. Do you think there should be restrictions on the use of cannabis? :

Personal use of cannabis should be legal. ,Sale of cannabis should be legal and regulated. ,Cultivation of cannabis for personal use should be legal.,Other – please explain.

There should be limited restrictions.

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

As an Australian living and working in Canada, I am privileged to reside where open consumption of cannabis is legal and beautiful storefronts sell regulated, child-proof packages of government-approved cannabis. I am allowed to grow at home, and I can travel on a domestic flight with 30 grams of cannabis.

For Australia to legalise cannabis, we need to learn from those already on the journey and make appropriate adjustments to suit our needs. With honest, candid conversations, a desire to challenge misinformation, and a concerted effort to demystify and destigmatize its use, Australians could soon realise the array of medical, therapeutic and recreational benefits cannabis offers.

In addition to policy change, one of our greatest challenges will be to modify the social narrative around the type of people who use cannabis and why they use it. Australians have been in my experience, generally uncomfortable with conversations about cannabis, imposing negative stereotypes on those who choose to partake. Yet, we tend to turn a blind eye to the 6,000 Australians dying each year from alcohol related illnesses as we often seem to sew excessive alcohol use into our social fabric - despite proven negative health impacts as well as its alarming connection to death, injury and violence.

As important as it is to not see cannabis as a panacea, it is equally important to not let the worst, often factually inaccurate stories about cannabis cloud reasonable and sensible policy decisions. I don't expect cannabis to be glamourised, but it should be common sense that it is far less dangerous than many other recreational vices we hold so dear as Australians. People have been gravely misled about the dangers of cannabis.

A. Preventing young people and children from accessing and using cannabis in Victoria.

To prevent young people and children from accessing and using cannabis in Victoria, there are a number of reasonable steps that can be taken at the policy, commercial and individual levels. Well considered policy would include child-safe containers, data-informed age restrictions, educational initiatives, and juvenile supply fines similar to alcohol. Consumer products available in Canada include lockable storage jars, bags and boxes as there is also a responsibility on the individual to store cannabis appropriately.

If cannabis is sold in a licensed store, with enforced age restrictions, minors will have less access to cannabis being sold by illicit market dealers who do not have a stake in requesting proof of age. Despite years of misinformation that would suggest otherwise, cannabis is not a gateway drug, but purchasing from an illicit dealer certainly can be a gateway to other illicit drugs.

Most importantly, our government, our families, and our health care professionals have an obligation to educate and inform about the truth about cannabis use. The one-size-fits-all, worst case scenario tales of cannabis use that turn out to be myths for most adult cannabis users aren't helpful. If we don't honestly separate fact from fiction, we reduce the impact of the honest data and advice about the potential negative effects of youth cannabis use.

B. Protect public health and public safety in relation to the use of cannabis in Victoria.

The protection of public health and safety is incredibly important, but it might do us well to consider the harmful impacts of other, less regulated activities or substances to ensure that we do not over-regulate with fear-based policy. There are practical steps to be taken including modifying roadside drug tests to screen for impairment rather than presence (presence does not equal impairment), storage and personal carry regulations, consumption regulations (relating to where you can consume), and warning labels.

Cannabis should also be seen for its potential to aid public health, rather than just the potential to hurt it. One of many examples of this is that cannabis has been shown to help reduce alcohol and opioid use in Canada, suggesting cannabis legalisation could significantly benefit those in our community who are marginalised by drug addiction. I am not suggesting that it is the first thing opioid users should try, but there is evidence that it could be used for harm reduction support.

It should be a priority to have a clear distinction between medical and recreational cannabis use but I believe it is essential that both exist. It should be okay to consume recreationally, just as medical patients should have access to more concentrated products than recreational users. For example, in Canada the legal THC limit for recreational edibles is 10mg while I personally know medical users who need 500mg dosages to manage symptoms associated with chronic illnesses such as cancer, HIV and AIDS. Potency limits for edibles would be essential for a brand new recreational market.

It will be important to also understand consumption methods, onset time and potency. For this reason, it might be worth considering a staggered introduction of products as Canada did. They initially rolled out cannabis flower, pre rolls, oils and gel capsules. Introducing vapes, edibles, topicals and concentrates a year later.

C. Implement health education campaigns and programs to ensure children and young people are aware of the dangers of drug use, in particular, cannabis use.

It is unfair to place the burden of improved drug education squarely on the legalisation of cannabis. I taught in Victorian primary schools between 2010 and 2018 and I saw how commonplace alarmist, fear-based and sometimes factually inaccurate much of the drug education curriculum is. It is also regularly taught by people uncomfortable with the subject matter, trying desperately to not get themselves in hot water with their equally uncomfortable administrators, or terrified parents. I'll never forget the Grade 6 student who did an incredibly informative project and diorama on the dangers of illicit drugs, being forced to re-do their project about the benefits of paracetamol - something their teacher was more comfortable with.

If you are going to successfully educate people about drug use, you need to include more stakeholders. The social stigma surrounding cannabis use prevents doctors, teachers, engineers, athletes and other standup, moral citizens who use cannabis from sharing their stories. Alarmist public health messaging has done us no favours. Drug policy is so often written by people who do not know people who use drugs, and drug education is so often taught by people who do not, and would never use drugs.

Instead of promoting fear, public health education programs should be focused on facts about youth cannabis use, facts about mental illness, consumption methods, onset times, potency information, and dosage information.

D. Prevent criminal activity relating to the illegal cannabis trade in Victoria.

The primary focus of preventing cannabis related criminal activity should be on criminal gangs and enterprises who use cannabis funds to supplement greater criminal misdeeds. The illegal status of cannabis has not prevented Victorians from using, growing, and distributing and has likely nurtured the growth of numerous criminal networks. Those networks would find it hard to compete with a legal, regulated market. One of Canada's biggest missteps is that the legal marketplace is struggling to compete with a thriving illicit market due to better products and pricing being available through unlicensed sources. Excessive prohibition, followed by excessive overregulation is to blame for this. We need regulations, but you shouldn't have to be a venture capitalist to survive in the legal marketplace.

Part of the prevention of illegal activity is to make adjustments to what is considered to be illegal activity - especially if it is an activity that current legislation is not addressing. Considerations should be made to eliminate criminal records in relation to cannabis-only offences and restorative justice and incentives could exist for some of those people to participate in the emerging new industry. While Canada made provisions to pardon cannabis-related offences, the exclusion of foundational pioneers of cannabis legalisation has prevented so many important key stakeholders from being involved in the legalisation they fought so hard for.

Even Canberra's legalisation of personal possession and home growing won't make a significant dent in the illicit market if you've still got nowhere to buy it, your 4 plants can only be grown outdoors and you're not allowed to share your harvest. These laws were a step in the right direction, but they are far from practical.

E. Assess the health, mental health, and social impacts of cannabis use on people who use cannabis, their families and carers.

While there are real risk factors for young people, as well as those genetically predisposed to mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, it is important that we do not lose sight of the incredibly small percentage of these cases amongst cannabis users. Alcohol, fast food, cigarettes, driving, and flying all pose more significant health risks than cannabis.

I often hear people blame cannabis for somebody they love being lazy, disconnected, or unmotivated but we are very quickly learning that many addictions stem from disconnection, trauma, lack of self-worth and lack of appropriate support services. Too many people wrongfully blame cannabis for issues that may actually require professional help.

The negative stories will flow, but for me and my out-and-proud Canadian peers, cannabis enhances our lives in so many ways. Anything has the potential to be abused, and that should be a burden of the human condition, not cannabis.

Cannabis is not a cure-all, but it holds huge potential that has been overshadowed for far too long by fear and misinformation. We must consider the impacts of cannabis use on youth, restrict their access to it, see potential public health benefits, educate the public on how to use cannabis safely, create distinct medical and

recreational streams, reconsider the criminal status of people with only cannabis related offences, and ultimately educate the public well enough, and honestly enough to help reduce the stigma associated with cannabis use.

While I have done my best to address the specific terms of reference of the Inquiry, I must implore you to do the due diligence to consider the many ways cannabis legalisation has not worked around the world. Please do not create an industry that is so restrictive and regulated that only millionaires and corporations can afford to play ball. There is an opportunity to do something new and incredibly special - will you work towards a model that could allow all Victorians, and eventually Australians to benefit?

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

With my experience in the Canadian cannabis industry, I am prepared to speak in person to the committee and to the media.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1:

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Paul M. O'Donoghue