

Discussion 1 : How can we improve education about cannabis and other drugs in victoria?

Growing up I went to nearly ten different schools. I have witnessed drug education in private, public, religious, alternative and distance education. During my time in Distance education I do not recall receiving any education on drug use in any of the time I was a student at various points between year 9 to vce. The majority of the other schools I attended the drug education were often only a handful of classes at the most that relied heavily on fear and were run by a teacher from the school. The classes were heavily clouded by any bias a teacher had towards certain drugs it was made out that there were zero positives to any drugs at all. If you were to even look at a drug your life would be over. We did not receive any education on what to do if we or someone we knew was suffering from addiction or what to do in the event of an overdose.

It was not unheard of at the non-public schools to hear about students being expelled for drug use outside of school time and not on school grounds as a way to protect the schools image. This created an environment where students were afraid to talk to their schools about drug use instead of learning from their teachers or parents who were brought up during the midst of the war on drugs that carried the same views students were learning from each other or older siblings. In the end this ended up with students quickly finding out that drugs were not instantly life destroying and even had some positives. During my time at high school I never once witnessed any peer pressuring around drugs like we were made to believe would be rampant, people would offer cannabis during parties or while hanging out but there was no mocking involved if someone turned the offer down. The original users that paved the way to other students seeing that drug use is not equal to drug abuse were often doing it as a form of rebellion as it seemed like a bigger deal than alcohol due to how teachers talked about it.

Eventually students suffering from anxiety and/or depression tried cannabis seeing that it did not ruin the lives of the small number of students that did it to rebel. For a lot of these students it was life changing. Suddenly they were doing better and they felt really cheated by the system that told them that cannabis would destroy their lives. An alternative school with the age range of 17-19 I attended had a very large number of students that fell into this category. Instead of bringing in outside services to check in with the students or even trying to find out why the students were using they choose to get a large number of teachers to try and close in around them off of school grounds to try and catch them in the process of using. As far as I know they did not catch anyone but this approach by the school obviously created an even larger distrust by the students. An emergency early morning assembly was called a day or two later where the principal announced that he would call the police on any student found with drugs. The distrust of authority was only made worse by this stunt and still we had not received any education on drug use. Many of the students at this school are a part of groups that often feel the police let them down. I can not think of a worse approach this school could have taken.

Speaking to other people my age expressed that the situation was also the same for them with how their drug education happened and the consequences of it.

The way schools go about drug education right now is not working. The best approach would be for independent organizations to come into schools that are not linked to police or the government. Due to the corruption the younger generations have witnessed in politics and denial of climate change, they don't find the government to have their best interests at heart and are less likely to engage. Young people are far more intelligent than adults tend to give them credit for they now have access to huge amounts of information online that I did not when I was younger they can see scientific reports about how certain drugs are being found to help people with conditions they may be suffering from even the news recently has run stories on numerous different illicit drugs they are being taught in school are life destroying. The fear based approach does not work and programs need to be developed that acknowledge this otherwise students are not going to trust anything they are being taught when they are regularly exposed to info that contradicts what they have been taught. Schools need to foster a more welcoming environment for students to ask questions or express concerns rather than punishing them because that is not helping anyone.

Discussion 2: the impacts of cannabis use and how the government can deliver better services.

During my time at school I really did not find any of my peers to have any negative effects from cannabis use other than the consequences of how schools negatively reacted rather than helping. For most it was a very rare occurrence to use cannabis and I only once came across someone that used any other illicit drugs whereas it was common for students to drink excessively and appeared to have more negative consequences. The somewhat more regular users were using cannabis as a way to self medicate. In my experience they suffered from mental health issues and they suddenly found themselves able to cope with things they could not before. I wouldn't be surprised if the use of cannabis to self medicate had increased in young people with how easy it is to access info on these benefits and the rising mental health crisis now than when I was in school.

I have watched a lot of my peers that used cannabis grow up and continue to use it to self medicate with no negative impacts to their life other than the fear of the legality of it. I have found that very few people are aware that cannabis is legal in Victoria for medical use or incorrectly assume the medicinal use means it is only CBD even though that is not true and that THC is also available as some conditions need it as well as CBD. Unfortunately for most of these people over the age of 18 they do not have the medical history or the funds to be able to go the legal route. When you are under 18 you have to

rely on your family to take you to mental health professionals but not all parents are able to do this as mental health specialists can be expensive or have the time or knowledge to pick up that their child may need help. When someone turns 18 they don't have much money to be able to go to mental health specialists the mental health care plan helps but it is not enough sessions and medicinal cannabis will only be prescribed as a last resort despite carry a massively lower risk when it comes to side effects than the most commonly prescribed medications for pain/mental health. Even if a young person was lucky to be in a situation where they were able to access enough healthcare and meet the criteria the fees of medicinal cannabis is way out of reach being hundreds of dollars a month easily. For most this is not something they can afford and they feel forced to have to rely on dealers where it is often cheaper but putting themselves at risk to be exposed to cannabis that was grown using PGR increasing their chances of developing cancer, causing fertility issues and other health problems that have not been properly researched yet. I don't know of a single person who would rather be able to be prescribed legally or buy for recreational use in the event of legalization to lower the risk of being exposed to harmful chemicals.

The government could deliver better services by making it cheaper and easier to access mental health care especially for those under the age of 18. Early intervention makes it that those kids/teens may not even need to use any drugs to help with their mental health and develop healthy coping strategies before things get out of control for them or early intervention for more serious long term conditions can start earlier on. In the case of over 18's the requirements to be prescribed need to be lowered. There is no reason medicinal cannabis should be offered as a last resort medication only if you can prove you have tried many other treatments first. I have spent huge amounts of my life suffering through too many medications to count, all of them offered little to no benefit and the side effects from them were life destroying and I could not function. Medicinal cannabis for me has been a game changer but it was hard to find a doctor who would prescribe it as many doctors may need some updates in their education around this issue. I do not understand why people like me can't have the right to make a choice from the age of 18 if we want it to be a first choice rather than having to go through a long list of medications with worse side effects or be forced to break the law. Lack of appropriate health care and choice is pushing young people to take illegal action even though from what I have seen they all want to do the right thing.

Discussion 3: Cannabis and the law - how cannabis prohibition affects young people?

Young people often feel very targeted by police when it comes to drug use. Places where young people are tend to end up having high police presence such as music festivals. At these events I have never witnessed an older person being stopped and searched but I see it all the time the younger someone appears to be the more likely they are to be searched. This is not stopping drug taking at these events you still see people on all kinds of drugs or it makes young people panic when they see the police/ sniffer dogs and sadly it has caused too many young people to pass away from them taking multiple drugs at once.

It is not just age that is the problem but someone's wealth or skin color plays a role in how the laws impact them. The richer areas are not policed as heavily when it comes to drugs but when someone does get caught in those areas you often hear them being let off the hook with a warning sometimes the same person will get multiple warnings or in the case they get charged their families can often afford good lawyers that can stop them from getting a criminal record.

Police do not appear as lenient with people from poorer backgrounds and this is creating problems in these communities as they can not afford expensive lawyers to help stop them getting criminal records. Instead they are ending up with charges which impacts their ability to get jobs and this causes people to end up in poverty and causing resentment.

A massive issue with the drug laws is driving. As I am a medicinal user I can not drive at all even though I do not have any side effects from my medications but because of this and living in an area without the best public transport I have to rely on my family to get me to places. Thankfully with university this year I have not had to go in many days so it has reduced how much I need to rely on my family to get me around but I fear what happens when I finish and properly enter the workforce it is going to be almost impossible for me to have a fulltime job if I can not drive. I have been prescribed medications which would have definitely impacted my driving ability, I never drove because I want to do the right thing even though it has been hugely restrictive to my life. Other people could easily break the laws around not driving when impacted by medications as they do not show up in roadside testing.

Roadside testing also greatly impacts people that use drugs recreationally. A lot of illicit substances stay in a person far longer than the impairment caused by them, not many

people know that fact. They may think that they have done the right thing by waiting in some cases days before driving but on a roadside test they may still test positive despite having zero impact on their driving. It is not fair on these people that they did the right thing by waiting but may end up losing their license due to inadequate testing where as someone that has been binge drinking the night before will most likely ok to drive at some point the next day and even able to have some alcohol in their system despite the fact that the same blood alcohol level may cause different levels of impairment depending on the person. We need to look into bringing in an American styled system that judges off a roadside impairment test that is also recorded in the event that the results need to be disputed in court.

Discussion 4: Should Cannabis be decriminalised and/or legalised in Victoria?

I have written my responses as a strictly medicinal user of cannabis who has no interest in using recreationally despite having access to cannabis with THC in it but I am one hundred percent for legalization.

At the very least in Victoria we should be looking at decriminalizing the use of all drugs. If someone is at the point that they are abusing drugs that is a health issue not a legal issue. Mental health issues is a major risk factor for abusing drugs even looking at just ADHD it carries a huge risk of risk taking behaviour and addiction comes along with that. In Victoria we do not have many psychologists/psychiatrists that are knowledgeable about ADHD and a large number of adults with the condition have not been diagnosed. You just have to look at online support groups for ADHD in Melbourne to see people are desperate to get a diagnosis but everyone is full or the testing is too expensive or adults finding out much later in life that they have ADHD and have spent a lifetime suffering from addiction and now that they are getting treatment they are no longer struggling with addiction. That is just one condition of many that raises someone's risk for addiction but people are not getting the help they need and Victoria is punishing them for it. Addiction is a health matter not a criminal matter charging someone for addiction is not going to help if anything it is going to make the matter worse as it alienates them from communities, makes it harder to get a job and people are not going to want to come forward to get help or discuss their drug use with health professionals. As I outlined earlier in the first question, the way schools teach and handle drug education has already instilled a fear of being open about drug use and it's a fear that probably hangs around for many adults suffering from addiction. We should still go after people selling drugs as they are preying on someone's health crisis and that

is not acceptable but the users need help not to have their lives further ruined by outdated laws.

Portugal is such a perfect example of what Victoria should look at doing at the very least. After decriminalizing all drugs they saw their overdose rate drop over 80%. I do not think I need to cover how amazing this was for Portugal and the lives saved as I am sure this is info already being submitted. For me and every other young person I have talked to this is beyond frustrating seeing such amazing examples of what we could do here to save lives. It's been 20 years since they have shown the world what can be done so why are we ignoring this.

Cannabis should be legalized. The risk of harm from it is low and does far less damage than alcohol does which is legal and studies show that alcohol is more addicting as well. Cannabis is incredibly easy to find in Victoria being illegal does not stop people from getting their hands on it. People are being exposed to the dangerous chemicals often used to grow cannabis where as if we set up stores like America people could go in and buy products knowing that it is safe and the levels of THC and CBD in it. Not being legalized the government is missing out on large amounts of tax that could be put towards mental health support and help manage the risk of addiction. No one bats an eye at people drinking to be social or using caffeine to get work done but both are drugs and both have risks. I do not see the difference. Why is an adult unable to make the decision on if they want to use recreationally when it does not cause harm to others? Cannabis is already out there and easy to find the legalization of sales is not going to see large amounts of people taking it up.

The Australian Capital Territory has legalized recreational use and allows people to grow their own plants. Victoria has a good opportunity here to follow their lead and add in the ability for stores to sell recreationally and get tax from it. Regardless of the law, the people that want to use cannabis are still doing so the laws we currently have do not work. Young Victorians get their hands on cannabis with very little issue at this point in time. I don't think the laws opening up are going to make it any easier for them than it already is. Just like with alcohol teenagers are going to break laws like these but at least with the tax money from the sale to adults the government could implement programs that will reduce the current use in teens until they are at an age where their brains are more developed and they can make the choice as an adult.