



## A BRIEF TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH (HESA) IN RESPONSE TO BILL C-45

*An Act respecting cannabis and to amend  
the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, the  
Criminal Code and other Acts*

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CANADIAN  
PHARMACISTS  
ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION DES  
PHARMACIENS  
DU CANADA



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### ***An Act respecting cannabis and to amend the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, the Criminal Code and other Acts***

On behalf of the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA) and Canada's 40,000 pharmacists, we would like to provide the Committee the following submission outlining our views on Bill C-45, *An Act respecting cannabis and to amend the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, the Criminal Code and other Acts*.

As Canada's medication experts, pharmacists have a unique perspective on the legalization of cannabis, with a particular focus on how the legislation would impact the current medical cannabis regime and how regulations could provide greater support for patients who use cannabis for medical purposes.

While we recognize that Bill C-45 is primarily focused on legalizing cannabis for recreational purposes, it is important that the Government not overlook how the proposed legislation could impact patients who rely on the medical cannabis system in Canada.

### **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### **We believe that the new legislative framework for cannabis in Canada should:**

- Ensure a distinction between recreational and medical cannabis
- Enhance and support increased research into medical cannabis to support safer, more effective prescribing and methods of administration, e.g. non-smokeable products
- Restrict the use of terms such as 'dispensary' or pharmacy-related symbols such as a green cross for the recreational distribution of cannabis
- Support and include pharmacists in the management and distribution of medical cannabis
- Establish pricing for recreational marijuana that would not encourage patient diversion from the medical cannabis stream
- Regulate recreational cannabis distribution through the lens of health promotion

#### **CPhA's recommendations to the Standing Committee on Health are informed by:**

- A growing concern among the profession about the lack of clinical oversight in the distribution of medical marijuana
- Consultations and input from pharmacists
- An independent report by KPMG
- Public opinion polling

### **MEDICAL AND RECREATIONAL CANNABIS: A DISTINCTION WITH A DIFFERENCE**

Although derived from the same plant, there are important differences between medical and recreational cannabis. For example, medical users may seek out strains and forms to alleviate symptoms while minimizing intoxication (primarily through cannabidiol or CBD), whereas recreational users may primarily be taking cannabis for euphoric effects (i.e. strains with higher THC levels).

Experience in international jurisdictions has demonstrated the importance of differentiating medical and recreational cannabis by restricting product strains and forms, as well as establishing distinct access channels for medical cannabis. For example, stakeholders in Colorado and Washington State agree that when the function of cannabis is medical, it should be treated as such in terms of dosage, guidelines, production, distribution and form.

One of our concerns is that existing shortcomings in the medical cannabis regime could be exacerbated with the move to legalize cannabis if there are not policies, practices and incentives employed to clearly differentiate between the medical and recreational use markets. The move to legalize cannabis for recreational purposes could create harm for the thousands of Canadians who use cannabis for medical purposes if, for example, cost and access are more attractive in the recreational market. Should this be the case, some patients may choose to access their supply through the recreational market, leaving them with no medical oversight, which could increase health complications for high-risk patients.

We are therefore pleased that the government signaled its intention to maintain two different streams of cannabis once cannabis is legalized in 2018. This is consistent with the recommendation from the Taskforce, calls from patient groups, and an independent report by KPMG entitled *Improving Medical Marijuana Management in Canada*.<sup>1</sup> In order to reduce harm, particularly for those who use cannabis for medical purposes, government must take steps to clearly differentiate the two markets before July 2018. A logical first step would be to ensure pharmacists' management and dispensing of medical cannabis in Canada.

**Recommendation:** Ensure a distinction between recreational and medical cannabis in the new regulatory regime.

## **STRENGTHENING THE MEDICAL CANNABIS REGIME**

### **Need for Increased Knowledge about Cannabis**

Despite the move towards legalization of cannabis in the context of recreational use, it is important to note that cannabis is still a drug with potential health impacts, including drug interactions and negative effects from smokeable forms. With more than 400 chemical agents, our understanding of the long-term effects of cannabis as well as the potential health benefits continues to evolve. Continued research into the effects of cannabis is critical to ensure that health care providers have the appropriate knowledge of this drug and that patients are able to use cannabis as safely as possible.

Although medical cannabis has been available to patients in Canada since 2001, its use is still largely experimental. Dosing of medical cannabis is dependent on the variety and potency of the cannabis strain, the method of administration as well as a patient's toxicity and tolerance level. In the absence of trusted, evidence-based research, dosing is currently undertaken through a trial and error process. Research may demonstrate, for example, that certain conditions require targeted strains, higher doses or particular methods of administration.

Expanded research into cannabis would contribute to safer, more effective prescribing practices, including promotion of the use of non-smokeable products over smokeable forms, and encourage health care providers to be informed of the evidence involving the therapeutic benefits and potential risks of cannabis. One significant area of concern for pharmacists is the potential for drug interactions. According to Health Canada and a growing body of evidence, cannabis, whether used for recreational or medical purposes, can interact with several drugs, particularly:<sup>2</sup>

- Any drugs which slow down the central nervous system, causing drowsiness. These may include sleeping pills, tranquilizers, some pain medications, some allergy or cold medications, or anti-seizure medications

<sup>1</sup>KPMG, *Improving Medical Marijuana Management in Canada*, March 2016. [https://www.pharmacists.ca/cpha-ca/assets/File/cpha-on-the-issues/March2016\\_Improving\\_Medical\\_Marijuana\\_Management\\_in\\_Canada\\_vf.pdf](https://www.pharmacists.ca/cpha-ca/assets/File/cpha-on-the-issues/March2016_Improving_Medical_Marijuana_Management_in_Canada_vf.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Health Canada, *Consumer Information - Cannabis*, August 2016. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/medical-use-marijuana/licensed-producers/consumer-information-cannabis-marihuana-marijuana.html>

- Antiretroviral drugs used in the treatment of HIV/AIDS, certain anti-depressants, stomach acid inhibitors, certain antibiotic and antifungal medications, certain heart medications, Saint John's Wort, etc.

**Recommendation:** Enhance and support increased research into medical cannabis to support safer and more effective prescribing.

### **Growth in Illegal 'Dispensaries'**

Since the government announced its intention to legalize marijuana, we have seen a proliferation of so-called 'dispensaries' across the country that claim to sell medical cannabis. As medical cannabis is legal in Canada under certain conditions, many Canadians are unaware that these are, in fact, illegal operations and further believe that they are obtaining a medical product. The use of the term 'dispensary' further compounds this misconception.

The National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA) released a position statement in April 2017 that urges against allowing distribution sites for non-medical cannabis to be permitted to use terms such as 'dispensary' or pharmacy-related symbols such as a green cross. These terms and symbols promote the notion that recreational marijuana has health benefits, which may lead the public to believe that the marijuana product is a medical product, that the distribution site is a pharmacy or that the site has professional oversight from pharmacy practitioners.

CPhA strongly supports restricting the use of the term 'dispensary' and pharmacy-related symbols for recreational cannabis distributors. It is particularly important to ensure that recreational cannabis consumers not be given a false sense that recreational marijuana is a health product and to further distinguish between recreational and medical marijuana.<sup>3</sup>

**Recommendation:** Restrict the use of terms such as 'dispensary' or pharmacy-related symbols such as a green cross for the recreational supply of cannabis.

### **The Role of Pharmacists in the Distribution of Medical Cannabis**

Over the past decade, we have seen a significant rise of cannabis use among patients. Across the country, pharmacists are regularly asked by their patients about the use of cannabis for a variety of different conditions.

However, pharmacists presently do not have a role in the distribution of medical cannabis. Given the chemical complexity of cannabis and its potential interaction with other medications, we believe it is essential that patients have as much support from qualified health providers as possible to strengthen patient safety and health system accountability.

Within the current medical cannabis supply process, patients consult with their physician who may issue a prescription for medical cannabis. Distribution is then managed through mail-order distributors, patient-grown cannabis or medical cannabis clinics. None of these include consultations with medication experts at the time of dispensing to ensure patients understand why they have been prescribed the medication, the method of administration, appropriate dosing, and any risks or adverse effects to expect from medication therapy, including potential interactions with other drugs.

With over 10,000 community pharmacies in Canada, pharmacists are well positioned to manage and dispense medical cannabis. Pharmacists are highly trained medication experts who use their expertise to detect potential drug interactions or other problems patients may experience with their medications during dispensing, regular medication reviews or chronic disease management. Pharmacists have the necessary expertise to mitigate the potential risks associated with medical cannabis, including harmful drug interactions, contraindications and potential addictive behaviour.

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<sup>3</sup>National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities, *Cannabis for Medical and Non-Medical Purposes: NAPRA Position Statement on the Role of Pharmacy Practitioners*, July 2017. [http://napra.ca/Content\\_Files/Files/Position\\_Statement\\_Cannabis\\_for\\_medical\\_and\\_nonmedical\\_purposes\\_July2017.pdf](http://napra.ca/Content_Files/Files/Position_Statement_Cannabis_for_medical_and_nonmedical_purposes_July2017.pdf)

While CPhA does not endorse any specific production or distribution system for recreational marijuana, we believe that, for medical cannabis, it is essential that patients have as much support from qualified health providers as possible. This is why we believe, as also concluded by the independent assessment by KPMG, that pharmacists must be supported in the management and dispensing of medical cannabis as the best option to protect patient and public safety in the medical cannabis stream.<sup>4</sup>

**Recommendation:** Support and include pharmacists in the management and distribution of medical cannabis.

### Cost

To support the integrity of the medical cannabis stream once recreational cannabis is legal in Canada, we must ensure that consumers/patients have reasonable access to their respective streams.

Cost can be an important driver in how Canadians and patients choose to access marijuana. Legalized recreational cannabis, therefore, should not be significantly lower in cost than medical cannabis. This could divert medical cannabis patients from the medical system for reasons of cost and convenience and remove patients from the supervision and oversight of their prescribing physician and other health care professionals, including pharmacists. We further believe that medical cannabis should be exempt from sales tax.

**Recommendation:** Establish pricing for recreational marijuana that would not encourage patient diversion from the medical cannabis stream.

## HEALTH PROMOTION APPROACH TO LEGALIZING CANNABIS

As we move towards legalization of cannabis in Canada, we urge the federal government, as well as provincial and territorial governments, to regulate recreational cannabis distribution through the lens of health promotion to reduce any negative impacts that may occur with legalization.

Health promotion strategies should include:

- Public education on the risks associated with using marijuana
- The establishment of a minimum age for legal purchase of recreational cannabis
- Product packaging containing warnings of the potential health hazards and adverse drug reactions association with marijuana use
- Rigorous product management regulations, such as behind-the-counter storage and restrictions on advertising
- Mandated training for retail staff on the differentiation between medical and recreational products and importance of directing medical cannabis users to licensed health care professionals

Health promotion as a priority for cannabis legalization will ensure that the health and safety of Canadians are protected and the risks are properly mitigated.

**Recommendation:** Regulate recreational cannabis distribution through the lens of health promotion.

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<sup>4</sup>KPMG, *Improving Medical Marijuana Management in Canada*, March 2016 [https://www.pharmacists.ca/cpha-ca/assets/File/cpha-on-the-issues/March2016\\_Improving\\_Medical\\_Marijuana\\_Management\\_in\\_Canada\\_vf.pdf](https://www.pharmacists.ca/cpha-ca/assets/File/cpha-on-the-issues/March2016_Improving_Medical_Marijuana_Management_in_Canada_vf.pdf)