

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Use of Cannabis for Medicinal Purposes</b>	<b>Ref. No.</b>	<b>REL-GOV-034</b>
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## INTRODUCTION

Cannabis is the most commonly used illegal substance in Australia<sup>i</sup> and New Zealand<sup>ii</sup>, with a wide body of research to suggest the harmful risks it poses, particularly to those from younger age groups, those with or at risk of psychotic illness, and those who use it on a regular basis<sup>iii</sup>.

'Medical cannabis' applies when cannabis is used for therapeutic and pain relief purposes. The primary medical use of cannabis is relief of symptoms rather than cure of underlying disease.<sup>iv</sup> Little data is available to distinguish the percentage of cannabis use for medical purposes compared with the percentage for recreational purposes, making it difficult to estimate the number of people already using cannabis for medical purposes.<sup>v</sup>

## CONTEXT

The use of cannabis for medical and/or any other purpose is currently prohibited in all Australian States and Territories<sup>vi</sup> and in New Zealand.<sup>vii</sup> The potential legalisation of medical cannabis has been a growing political issue in recent years, with momentum gaining towards the introduction of medical cannabis in both countries.

In Australia, the *Regulator of Medicinal Cannabis Bill 2014* is currently before a Senate Committee, with reporting due on 15 June 2015.<sup>viii</sup> It is expected that the Bill will be debated later this year, with the Australian Greens flagging their intention of introducing the Bill before parliament.<sup>ix</sup>

Additionally, the New South Wales, Queensland and Victorian governments have all announced plans to begin clinical trials of medical cannabis. The New South Wales and Victorian governments have both outlined that their trials will be targeted at children with severe, drug-resistant epilepsy.<sup>x xi</sup> The Queensland government has not ruled out also conducting trials in this manner.

## HEALTH/WELLBEING IMPACTS

The scientific and clinical evidence to support the medicinal use of cannabis and cannabis-derived products is poor. However, some scientific evidence exists to indicate their potential therapeutic value for pain relief, control of nausea and vomiting, and appetite stimulation.<sup>xii</sup> There are suggestions that medical cannabis may be beneficial for sufferers of HIV, neurological conditions such as Multiple Sclerosis, patients undergoing chemotherapy and for those seeking pain relief where conventional medicine has failed.<sup>xiii</sup>

Cannabis is a crude plant product, which contains a complex mixture of many chemicals. This makes production of a standard cannabis product extremely difficult, as it is not clear which chemicals are responsible for particular therapeutic effects, and the reaction invoked by the drug differs vastly amongst individuals. Cannabis smoke in particular, contains a variety of substances that are dangerous to health.<sup>xiv</sup>

In small quantities cannabis use can have immediate effects on perception, appetite and coordination. In larger quantities, perception is at greater risk of being distorted and some people even experience hallucinations. The long term effects can consist of reduced motivation, reduced brain function, hormone imbalance, a reduced immune system and an increased risk of psychosis.<sup>xv</sup>

Imaging studies in adolescents have shown that regular cannabis users display impaired neural connectivity in specific brain regions involved in a broad range of executive functions.<sup>xvi</sup> Frequent and persistent cannabis use starting in adolescence was associated with a loss of an average of 8 IQ points measured in mid-adulthood according to one particular New Zealand study.<sup>xvii</sup>

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Smoking is widely recognised as the most harmful and dangerous method of using cannabis. Cannabis smoke is associated with increased risk of cancer, lung damage and poor pregnancy outcomes.<sup>xviii</sup> This method of administration is unlikely to be safe treatment for any chronic medical condition.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The College recommends:

1. Opposing the use of medical cannabis until a body of evidence exists to demonstrate that the benefits observed significantly outweigh any associated risk
2. Using caution, and particularly recommends against smoking as a way of administering cannabis
3. Strongly opposing the use of cannabis in children, adolescents or any other vulnerable groups except in the context of well run clinical trials
4. Expressing concern that the legalisation of medical cannabis by governments would send the wrong message to the community, and downplays the harmful risks associated with illicit drug use.

**Approver:** Director, Relationships & Advocacy  
**Authoriser:** Governance & Advocacy Committee

<sup>i</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey Report, Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Ministry of Health, Drug Use in New Zealand: Key results of the 2007/08 New Zealand Alcohol and Drug Use Survey, Wellington: Ministry of Health, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Department of Health Victoria, Better Health Channel: Cannabis [Internet]. 2015. From: [http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Cannabis\\_marijuana?open](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Cannabis_marijuana?open). Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research centre, Report of the Working Party on the Use of Cannabis for Medical Purposes Volume 1, Sydney: 2000, University of New South Wales.

<sup>v</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research centre, Report of the Working Party on the Use of Cannabis for Medical Purposes Volume 1, Sydney: 2000, University of New South Wales.

<sup>vi</sup> Australian Institute of Criminology, Cannabis [Internet]. 2015. From: [http://www.aic.gov.au/crime\\_types/drugs\\_alcohol/drug\\_types/cannabis.htm](http://www.aic.gov.au/crime_types/drugs_alcohol/drug_types/cannabis.htm). Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>vii</sup> New Zealand Police, Cannabis and the Law [Internet]. Undated. From <http://www.police.govt.nz/advice/drugs-and-alcohol/cannabis-and-law>. Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Parliament of Australia, Regulator of Medicinal Cannabis Bill 2014 [Internet]. Undated. From [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal\\_and\\_Constitutional\\_Affairs/Medicinal\\_Cannabis\\_Bill](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Medicinal_Cannabis_Bill). Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>ix</sup> Di Natale, R. Australian company granted first license to grow and export medicinal cannabis. Australia: 2015. From: <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2015/s4239729.htm>. Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>x</sup> NSW Health, Clinical Trials: Medical use of Cannabis [Internet]. 2015. From: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/cannabis/Documents/fs-cannabis-trials.pdf>. Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>xi</sup> Department of Health Victoria, Medicinal Cannabis [Internet]. 2015. From: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/dpcs/medicinal-cannabis.htm>. Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>xii</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research centre, Report of the Working Party on the Use of Cannabis for Medical Purposes Volume 1, Sydney: 2000, University of New South Wales.

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<sup>xiii</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research centre, Report of the Working Party on the Use of Cannabis for Medical Purposes Volume 1, Sydney: 2000, University of New South Wales.

<sup>xiv</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research centre, Report of the Working Party on the Use of Cannabis for Medical Purposes Volume 1, Sydney: 2000, University of New South Wales.

<sup>xv</sup> Department of Health Northern Territory, Cannabis The Facts [Internet]. 2009. From: [http://www.health.nt.gov.au/Alcohol\\_and\\_Other\\_Drugs/Cannabis/](http://www.health.nt.gov.au/Alcohol_and_Other_Drugs/Cannabis/) Accessed 15 June 2015

<sup>xvi</sup> National Institute of Drug Abuse, What are Marijuana's long term effects on the brain? [Internet]. 2015. From <http://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/contact-us>. Accessed 15 June 2015.

<sup>xvii</sup> Meir M., Avshalom C., Ambler, A., Harrington. H., Houts. R., Keefe, R., et al. Persistent cannabis users show neuropsychological decline from childhood to midlife. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America Vol . 2012; 109 (40). From <http://www.pnas.org/content/109/40/E2657.abstract?tab=author-info>.

<sup>xviii</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research centre, Report of the Working Party on the Use of Cannabis for Medical Purposes Volume 1, Sydney: 2000, University of New South Wales.