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The Federal parliament is about to consider legislation calling for the decriminalisation of marijuana. The public will be told this issue has been well debated, that committees have carefully weighed the scientific evidence, that it is a positive public health move, and that the Canadian public is somehow “ready” for it. The public will also hear that this move is necessary to federal drug policy. We question this, and seriously question why the government is moving to decriminalize marijuana when it has done so little in the last decade to prevent drug use in the first place.

The push to decriminalize marijuana has been hasty. The whole of the scientific evidence regarding the effects of marijuana have not been well publicized to the Canadian public. The current attitude of policy makers and legislators regarding this change frequently has been to downplay the seriousness of the implications of the legislation. It has been portrayed by many as “no big deal.” The vast majority of testimony before both the Senate and House Committees has been from pro-legalization forces. Yet, the move to decriminalize marijuana runs the risk of portraying marijuana use as being without serious potential physical, cognitive and emotional, social, and economic consequences for families and individuals. The current legislation puts Canada at a drug policy crossroads with serious implications for the future of Canada, especially its youth. The general public - families, parents, teachers, youth, families, community organizations, workplaces, religious institutions and other individuals and organizations - must be made aware of the risks of marijuana and of the implications any legislation would have on the use of this substance.

The Addictive Drug Information Council asserts the following to the federal government and to the Canadian public.

1. The research evidence, contrary to what some say, does NOT suggest marijuana is in any way safe nor does it assure us we are not making a serious mistake if we increase our acceptance of and use of this substance. This is especially true given that marijuana today is quite a different substance than that experienced by many middle-aged Canadians. It is many times stronger due to deliberate cultivation to enhance the concentrations of the active ingredient, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). The most recent and best-conducted research confirms that marijuana today is a powerful and potentially addictive drug.^{4,6,7} It can damage the respiratory system and produce effects similar to tobacco, the full seriousness of which and we do not now know.⁹ It affects the nervous system, especially in the developing brains of children and teens, and marijuana use, especially early onset use, is implicated in impaired memory, cognitive, attention and decision-making functions.^{1,2,3,5,8} Nor has marijuana been shown to have unique medical benefits in and of itself, contrary to anecdotal and biased claims to the contrary. The marijuana as medicine issues has been used as a wedge to push for changing marijuana laws. All research, not just that which appears to suggest marijuana is not so harmful, must be made know. And, that which research can never tell us must be acknowledged, and that is, whether or whether we would want our children and youth to use it, or in any way suggest its use is simply an expression of civil rights. Drug use ultimately causes far more harm than good to human rights. It is not simply an expression of human rights.

2. The population groups that stand to be hurt most by marijuana use are Canada's children and youth. Governments, and responsible adults, have a legal and moral obligation to protect these most vulnerable of our citizens. We question whether the legislative and policy direction currently being followed does this.
3. The law is unquestionably a vital component in preventing and reducing drug use and abuse. We do not need to move toward the acceptance of another legal or quasi-legal drug. While replacing criminal charges for simple possession with fines may prevent stigmatisation or criminal records for youth, the truth is that very few youth are receiving criminal records for simple possession under the CURRENT legislation. The other component of the proposed legislation, stiffening the penalties for production and trafficking of marijuana, is long overdue and does not have to be accompanied by any other legislative changes. We question why it is only now being considered, and is being tied with decriminalisation. The only possible way new legislation will have any benefit is if it is aggressively and consistently enforced. Otherwise, the legislation will give a tacit green light to marijuana use, precisely the wrong message to Canadians. This false message has already been given in the media and even by members of government. The intent to enforce the law aggressively must be assured.
4. The proposed limit of 30 grams is too large. Any limit must be a fraction of this. The Dutch government reduced their limit to 5 g. This eliminates traffickers carrying small amounts for sale and saying it is for personal consumption.
5. The primary intent of the legislation must be made very clear up front: To give the police discretion in making charges that for very small amounts, result in a fine.
6. The most essential element in a National Drug Strategy is not to make access to drugs easier, but to work with families and communities to prevent drug use from starting in the first place, and to help persons who are using drugs to be encouraged to stop. The federal government has made no concerted effort in prevention since the Really Me! Campaign in the late 1980's. During this absence, youth marijuana use has increased substantially and the increase has been sharpest in British Columbia. Drug policy has drifted toward an approach that is lowering the bar of expectations or aspirations that we would hope Canadians to achieve. The second most essential component is sufficient access to effective treatment of addiction. Neither treatment nor prevention is receiving sufficient attention, while the focus instead is being placed on steps that promise to increase the social acceptance of marijuana use.

The Canadian public is not clamouring for change nor have they given the government a mandate for this legislation. In the deafening absence of federal or provincial public awareness about the harms of drug use that has existed since 1989, the notion that drugs are not such a problem has grown. At the same time, the media has been filled with biased, one-sided reports about marijuana. It is no wonder that there has been little public outcry about the legislation. We believe there are far more important issues Canadians would have their government consider right now than making marijuana use easier.

We express deep concern about the message this legislation has already sent and is sending Canadians, especially youth. We do not believe that youth should be permanently marked for their indiscretions. But we do not think that research supports the case that this is happening under the current legislation.

We urge the Canadian public to speak out to ensure that in any legislation it considers, the federal government place its prime attention on measures that will decrease, not increase the availability and acceptance of drug use including marijuana, and that it strengthen its support to families and communities in preventing drug use and in treating addiction.

We call on the federal government to increase its efforts on prevention and to affirm a goal of a Canada where drug use is not considered socially responsible. We think this, not a country soft on drug use, is what Canada should stand for. We ask the government in its deliberations to act with prudence and with an eye not to appeasing those who choose to use marijuana, but on caring for Canadian families, communities and children, which together form the very basis of our society.

References

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