

Thank you for your correspondence of 14 September 2017 to the Minister for Health and Minister for Sport, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, regarding effects of cannabis on a person's health. The Minister has asked me to reply.

The Minister's comments about the possible fatal effects of cannabis are accurate. This is why the Australian government does not support the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use and has established a medicinal cannabis access framework that is carefully regulated by the TGA and administered by the medical profession.

While it is recognised that the acute toxicity of medicinal cannabis is lower than many other substances, there are a number of studies that have demonstrated the potential deadly effects of exposure to cannabis.

A 2011 study Cannabis-related hospitalizations: unexpected serious events identified through hospital databases attributed a death from cardiac failure in a man in France to long term cannabis use (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3093081/). This was reinforced in March this year when the American College of Cardiologists found a 26 per cent increase in ischaemic stroke risk and a 10 per cent increase in risk of heart failure, both potentially fatal conditions, in cannabis users, more information is available at: www.acc.org. by searching for keywords 'marijuana risk stroke'.

In the clinical setting, a study undertaken on oral cannabis extracts being used to treat epilepsy in children found nearly half had adverse events arising from the cannabis use, It noted that 'rare adverse events included developmental regression, abnormal movements, status epilepticus requiring intubation and death'. Findings from that study are available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25845492.

Cannabis has known drug interactions that can lead to potentially fatal outcomes if not correctly managed. It is for these reasons that the prescription of medicinal cannabis has been placed in the hands of medical professionals, with oversight by the TGA to ensure appropriate prescription and patient safety.

The Minister may have also been referring to the known and possible safety risks associated with unregulated medicinal cannabis. Earlier this year a cancer patient in California died from a rare fungal infection traced back to the cannabis he was taking to manage his symptoms, California does not regulate the quality of the cannabis sold in its dispensaries.

In contrast, Australia has quality standards, Therapeutic Goods Order 93. that protects patients from these hazards. More information on the Therapeutic Goods Orders is available at:-
www.tga.gov.au/therapeutic-goods-orders.

The Department of Health understands the health issues associated with prescription opioid narcotics, tobacco and alcohol and is working to minimise these. For example, Australia leads the world in the area of tobacco control with its plain-packaging legislation that other countries are now looking to mimic.

That we have public health issues with these substances is not a reason to put another substance with known psychoactive effects freely into the marketplace. However, where there is legitimate medical need to use cannabis, the Government has put in place a framework that achieves the right balance between patient treatment and patient safety,

Thank you for bringing this matter to the Minister's attention.

Yours sincerely

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