

Australian Christian Lobby

Submission: Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment
(Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023

Committee Secretary
The Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria

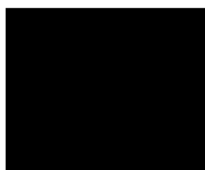
13 December 2024

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) is grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission into the Inquiry into Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023 ('Bill').

Thank you for giving our submission your careful consideration.

Yours Faithfully,



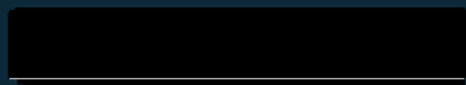
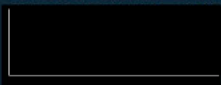
Jasmine Yuen

Victorian State Director, Australian Christian Lobby

About The Australian Christian Lobby

The vision of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) is to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With around 250,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between the Christian constituency and government, allowing the Voice of Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned. ACL representatives bring a Christian perspective to policy makers in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.



The Australian Christian Lobby ('ACL') is opposed to the above Bill, which seeks to make it lawful for an adult to possess small quantities of cannabis for personal use and for an adult to cultivate no more than six cannabis plants for personal use. It would also permit an adult lawfully in possession of cannabis to give the cannabis by way of a gift to another adult and for other purposes.

Cannabis causes significant harm and material health, safety, societal and economic costs annually, including numerous road deaths caused by drug affected drivers. Cannabis does not just impact the individual taking drugs, it can also affect their families and the broader community. Evidence shows legalisation will also result in increased drug use in Victoria, and put pressure on already stretched health and rehabilitation services.

Reasons for ACL opposing this Bill include:

1. Illicit drugs, including marijuana, are dangerous and should not be legalised:

- There is no safe level of illicit drugs.

2. Legalisation increases the use of cannabis

- Cannabis, including medicinal cannabis, is addictive.
- Illegality deters people from trying cannabis. Legalising cannabis creates a perception it is safer than it is, and increases drug use. Legalising may also be seen as normalising or condoning drug-taking behaviour by young people.ⁱ
- The 2022 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime 'UNODC' World Drug Report 2022 found that legalisation of cannabis has increased daily usage and related health impacts. "Cannabis legalization in North America appears to have increased daily cannabis use, especially potent cannabis products and particularly among young adults. Associated increases in people with psychiatric disorders, suicides and hospitalizations have also been reported."ⁱⁱ

3. Cannabis has been proven to cause significant physical and mental health issues:

- Scientific evidence links cannabis, including medicinal cannabis, to psychiatric disorders (anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, and psychosis). Evidence also links cannabis use to birth defects (including missing limbs and autism), genetic mutations, cognitive impairment (negatively impacting memory, learning and attention), causal for 38 types of cancer, bones, lung function, the respiratory and cardiovascular systems.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The Australian Medical Association ('AMA') is opposed to legalising cannabis because it would indicate it is not harmful. They highlight there can be short and long term mental and physical health issues with using cannabis. The AMA has also raised concerns that legalising cannabis will result in increased health harms and put increased demand on existing strained health services and mental health and drug rehabilitation services.^{iv}
- London and Dutch studies have shown marijuana causes between 30 and 50 per cent of new psychosis/schizophrenia diagnoses.^v

- The 2022 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime ‘UNODC’ World Drug Report 2022 found the cannabis legalisation resulted in associated increases in people with psychiatric disorders, suicides and hospitalizations.^{vi}
- 4. There is limited evidence that medicinal cannabis benefits medical conditions:**
- The Australian Government’s Therapeutic Goods Administration ‘TGA’ has issued ‘Guidance for the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia’ in November 2024. It considers the evidence base for medicinal cannabis and states “Currently there is limited evidence about the effectiveness of medicinal cannabis for use in different medical conditions. There is also little known about the most suitable doses of individual cannabis products.”
 - It is noted that only two cannabis products are currently registered with the TGA. Other ‘unapproved’ cannabis products are available in Australia by prescription only.^{vii}
- 5. There are significant economic and social impacts linked to drug taking:**
- Drugs do not just impact the individuals taking them. They also cause significant adverse public health costs and societal well-being impact.
 - **Healthcare Costs:** Legalisation would strain healthcare systems due to increased cannabis-related physical and mental health issues. The AMA has also raised concerns that legalising cannabis will result in increased health harms and put increased demand on existing strained health services and mental health and drug rehabilitation services.^{viii}
 - **Workplace productivity costs:** This is due to workplace absenteeism and decreased productivity.
 - **Social costs:** Legalisation may lead to higher rates of addiction and social disintegration. There are costs of additional traffic fatalities, violence, homicide, administrative and regulatory costs, property damage and crime.
 - The KPMG Rethink Australia Report ‘Understanding Addiction’ found that the annual cost of addiction to illicit and other drugs in Australia in 2021 was \$12.9 billion.^{ix}
- 6. Marijuana is a gateway drug:** Marijuana use often leads to experimentation with other more dangerous drugs.^x
- 7. Marijuana is contributing to a significant increase in road deaths and accidents caused by drivers under the influence of drugs:** Legalisation of cannabis will likely lead to increased road fatalities and injuries due to drug driving. Studies indicate that marijuana impairs cognitive and motor skills, increasing the risk of hitting obstacles by 16 times.^{xi} The NSW motoring organisation, NRMA, released a Road Safety report on 25 November 2024 ‘Driving High’.^{xii} This report includes statistics that in NSW in 2023 there were 79 deaths in NSW in 2023 caused by drug related crashes, up from 55 in 2022, and 69% of these drivers tested positive to the presence of cannabis. Drug driving contributes 24% of NSW road deaths and is the second leading cause of road deaths, despite drug driving being illegal in NSW. In 2023 one in every six roadside drug tests conducted by police was positive to someone with illegal drugs in their system.^{xiii} Illegal drug

driving rates in NSW have doubled in just four years. In 2022, 17,792 drivers were caught illegally drug driving, compared to 8,700 in 2018.^{xiv}

8. **Legalising cannabis will result in a breach Australia’s treaty obligations under the United Nations International Drug Control Treaties**, of which Australia is one of 180 countries that are signatories. Article 4 of the 1961 Convention obliges signatories to “ensure that the production, manufacture, import, export, distribution of, trade in, use and possession of drugs is to be limited exclusively to medical and scientific purposes.”^{xv}

Suggested Solutions:

9. **Rather than legalising cannabis, a ‘prevention’ approach should be the foundation for Victoria’s drug policy:**
- A prevention approach focuses on stopping drug use before it begins through education, awareness campaigns, and community programs and adopts treatment programs that address the underlying issues that lead to drug use. Prevention approaches have proven to be effective in reducing both drug use and drug-related harm in Australia and overseas.
 - Australia had a stringent deterrent and supply reduction approach to drugs from 1998 until 2004. Research by The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that both drug use and drug related harm declined during this period. In contrast, this research also found that the current harm minimisation policies in effect in the periods prior to and following this time failed to reduce harm to individuals and also increased harm to families and the community.^{xvi} This study critically evaluated strategies to combat harm associated with drug use, including levels of drug use, deaths from overdose, and sexually infectious disease transmission. It also considered which approaches resulted in a reduction of drug availability and supply and reduced overall drug use levels.
10. **There should be a comprehensive education campaign regarding the physical, mental and road safety risks of cannabis.** People think it is safe because it is now used for medicinal purposes, and is readily available, including as edibles, yet the evidence proves that this is not the case.

