

## Inquiry into the use of Cannabis in Victoria

Mrs Jasmine Yuen

**Organisation Name:** Australian Christian Lobby

**Your position or role:** Acting Victorian Director

### SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this Inquiry into the use of Cannabis in Victoria to consider::**

Young people and children, Public health, Public safety, Social impacts, Accessing and using cannabis, Criminal activity, Mental health, Education

**What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :**

Advocacy body

**Are there any additional themes we should consider?**

Rehabilitation program that help people get off drugs. A drug free state.

**Select all that apply. Do you think there should be restrictions on the use of cannabis? :**

Sale should remain illegal. , Personal use of cannabis should remain illegal.

### YOUR SUBMISSION

**Submission:**

**Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:**

### FILE ATTACHMENTS

**File1:** [5f4ca9005649d-ACL Submission on Cannabis Use in Victoria 2020.pdf](#)

**File2:**

**File3:**

**Signature:**

Jasmine Yuen

Legislative Council, Legal  
and Social Issues  
Committee:  
**Submission on the Use  
of Cannabis in Victoria**

AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN LOBBY



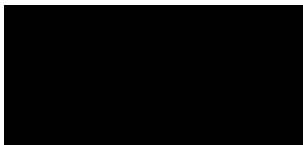
**Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee**

31 August 2020

Dear Committee,

Please find attached submission from the Australian Christian Lobby on the Use of Cannabis in Victoria.

Regards



**Jasmine Yuen**

Director (Acting) | Vic

# Introduction

The Australian Christian Lobby welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the use of Cannabis in Victoria. The ACL does not support the decriminalization of possessing, cultivating or using cannabis of any form for personal or recreational purposes based on the reasons below:

## 1. Medicinal Cannabis is still a concern and its efficacy uncertain

Although the Narcotic Drugs Amendment Act 2016 has legalised medicinal cannabis, there are still widespread concerns about its efficacy and side effects. A recent submission to the Senate Inquiry into the current barriers to patients' access to medicinal cannabis in Australia (2020) by the Australian Medical Association (AMA) reinstated its position on cannabis use, namely that though side effects that result from the short-term use of medicinal cannabis are minor, the risks associated with long-term use are still unknown. It has also said that "Though there is a growing body of evidence regarding the therapeutic use of cannabinoids, it is still experimental."<sup>1</sup> The AMA observes that treatment is needed for a growing number of cannabis dependant users but expressed concerns over the lack of awareness of treatment options available to these regular users. Such views imply the need to maintain strict regulations and legislation on cannabis use, both for medicinal and recreational purposes.

The submission also shows there are concerns among General Practitioners who are either uncertain about the regulations on prescribing medicinal cannabis or evidence in clinical trials and its scheduling. It quoted one of its members stating that the medicinal cannabis "is in limbo to some extent as it is legal but not readily accessible and not prescribed through the usual channels. It is more just decriminalised than a true therapeutic drug."<sup>2</sup> Amidst the poorly understood side effects from long-term medical use and the lack of substantial evidence from clinical trials, coupled with the concerns about the increasing incidence of cannabis dependant users, the government should not make any legislative changes until those concerns are addressed and concrete evidence on the efficacy of medicinal cannabis are obtained.

The former AMA President Dr Tony Bartone is opposed to medicinal cannabis. In a 2018 interview Dr Bartone stated that medicinal cannabis is not showing a desirable

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://ama.com.au/system/tdf/documents/Cannabis%20Medicinal%20-%202020%20-%20Inquiry%20into%20barriers%20to%20patient%20access%20to%20medicinal%20cannabis%20in%20Australia\\_1.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=51834](https://ama.com.au/system/tdf/documents/Cannabis%20Medicinal%20-%202020%20-%20Inquiry%20into%20barriers%20to%20patient%20access%20to%20medicinal%20cannabis%20in%20Australia_1.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=51834) (Pg. 3)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Pg. 5.

efficacy as expected.<sup>3</sup> In response to the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia he said,

“...there's still not the rigour, the process, and the efficient data available about the narrow therapeutic windows that some of these products have. So, just to be clear about that, the evidence around the world is being reviewed and has been found to be particularly weak in parts, not robust enough, not precise enough, not clear enough...

because of a considerable amount of political and media interest in pushing this product to the market before it's gone through its usual channels of preparation and supply and logistical surety. It's really created this demand, this inertia, this desire by the public for information for availability. But we're finding now even today there's a report from The Lancet that says that medicinal cannabis really is not that good an option for use in chronic pain...

Because there's still not the robust data behind it. As I was mentioning on a number of occasions, that data is still of dubious, it doesn't give us the surety about how, when, and why to use it with complete comfort, even amongst the particular specialists involved in the particular disciplines who might use it - refractory, paediatric epilepsy, for example, where it's probably got its best level of indication and evidence supporting it, there is still conjecture about the right form and the right type to be using. But in other things like palliative care, some of the data, some of the studies show a really poor level of evidence.”<sup>4</sup>

It seems that after years of trials, the efficacy of medicinal cannabis is still uncertain, and there is still insufficient evidence that show it's helpful to patients. What is also concerning is the uncertainty on what and how to use medicinal cannabis in a safe way.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) 2020 report on the “Safety of low dose cannabidiol” still shows the uncertainty around the safe usage of Cannabidiol (CBD), the non-psychoactive component derived from the cannabis plants for medical use.

“Given that CBD has not been widely used in clinical practice and the evidence for which conditions it is effective has not been thoroughly characterised, it remains important that whether or not a safe limit can be identified, that the appropriate regulatory controls are maintained to ensure both safety and quality of products containing CBD. Any re-consideration of the current regulatory status of CBD, must ensure that a medicine supplied under lower medical oversight is not used to substitute medicines in conditions where medical supervision is required. For example, in the treatment of epilepsy or

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://ama.com.au/ausmed/curiosity-over-medicinal-cannabis-grows-not-evidence>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://ama.com.au/media/transcript-dr-bartone-rn-medicinal-cannabis>

schizophrenia where medical supervision is required and known drug-drug interactions and pharmacodynamics interactions could lead to patient harm.”<sup>5</sup>

While the report shows the importance of a right dosage, the right dosage is still in an experimental stage. The right and safe dosage for children especially is still uncertain.<sup>6</sup> Although medicinal cannabis appears to be effective in paediatric epilepsy, as seen in the case of Charlotte Figi in the USA that has inspired sweeping global law changes on medicinal cannabis and the development of the Charlotte’s Web formula by the Colorado marijuana business the Stanley Brothers,<sup>7</sup> it’s often overlooked that the cannabis oil she used is high in Cannabidiol (CBD), though low in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive component.<sup>8</sup> This raises further doubts about the efficacy of medicinal cannabis.

In view of all these uncertainties, strict regulations must still be in place to ensure the drug is not misused, and safe low dosage is administered to both adults and children for medical purposes only. Although the TGA recommends down scheduling could apply to adults only if necessary, the ACL recommends medicinal cannabis should be kept at Schedule 4, that is, only available through prescription for both adults and children in view of its uncertain effects. Any relaxation on the regulations will see the possibility of substance abuse and overdose.

## **2. Recreational Cannabis use is concerning, decriminalizing it is dangerous**

As mentioned, ACL does not support any recreational use of cannabis. If the safety and efficacy of medicinal cannabis is uncertain, how would it be safe to use cannabis for recreational purposes?

In its 2015 submission on Medicinal Cannabis Issues Paper, AMA Victoria has warned against crude cannabis use. It is stated that “smoking or injecting a crude plant product is harmful, and regular inhalation of cannabis can increase the risk of lung damage and cause higher rates of psychotic illness.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, crude cannabis is mostly used as a recreational drug.

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019 shows that most people first tried drugs in their late teens, and cannabis is the first drug they tried. While the survey shows the age people first tried drugs is higher, the average drug usage has increased, and cannabis use tops

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.tga.gov.au/sites/default/files/review-safety-low-dose-cannabidiol.pdf> (Page. 7)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Pg. 10.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.charlottesweb.com/>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/04/09/girl-who-inspired-charlottes-web-marijuana-oil-dies/5120478002/>

<sup>9</sup> See [https://amavic.com.au/publicassets/3267eb92-64c2-e611-80d2-005056be66b1/AMA\\_Victoria\\_submission\\_to\\_Victorian\\_Law\\_Reform\\_Commission\\_on\\_Medicinal\\_Cannabis\\_Issues\\_Paper.pdf](https://amavic.com.au/publicassets/3267eb92-64c2-e611-80d2-005056be66b1/AMA_Victoria_submission_to_Victorian_Law_Reform_Commission_on_Medicinal_Cannabis_Issues_Paper.pdf)

the list.<sup>10</sup> Although it's a welcome sign to see young people are delaying experimenting with drugs, it's not cause for a sense of relief about drug dependency in our nation. Therefore, any relaxation of regulation and legislation will send a wrong message to young people and reverse the trend. According to Dr Bartone,

“Cannabis use can be harmful, and in some instances may lead to acute-onset psychosis, or the exacerbation of pre-existing psychotic symptoms. There are potentially serious health implications for young people with mental health problems who use cannabis. Any moves to decriminalise cannabis must recognise that young people may be vulnerable to both the effects of the drug, as well as dependence.”<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noting that while some in the society are in favour of decriminalizing cannabis, often referring to successful overseas models, it's important to know that the legal age for cannabis use in Colorado is 21 years old.<sup>12</sup> In the USA, although many states have legalized recreational drugs such as cannabis, it's still illegal under the federal law. The then AMA Victoria President Dr Bartone called for a “coordinated and consistent federal approach legislative reform and regulation of medicinal cannabis, rather than a state-by-state approach,”<sup>13</sup> and this should apply also to the regulation of recreational drugs.

Again, as many hail the successful overseas story, it's important to note the position of the American Medical Association on cannabis use. The statement of its President Dr Harris read,

“The American Medical Association commends the Surgeon General for issuing an advisory today on the harmful health effects of cannabis use by pregnant women and youth. We strongly support this effort as the AMA has long discouraged cannabis use by youth, pregnant women, and women who are breastfeeding and has called for research to determine the consequences of long-term cannabis use in these populations.

“The AMA has urged legislatures to delay legalizing cannabis until further research is completed on the public health, medical, economic, and social consequences of its use. In states that have already legalized cannabis, the AMA

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/9569b88d-3326-46e2-8df8-bf88a93e2d22/aihw-phe-270-Chapter4-Illicit-drugs.pdf.aspx> (Pg. 5)

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-17/greens-cannabis-policy-sends-wrong-message/9667450>

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/marijuana/laws-about-marijuana-use>

<sup>13</sup> See [https://amavic.com.au/publicassets/3267eb92-64c2-e611-80d2-005056be66b1/AMA\\_Victoria\\_submission\\_to\\_Victorian\\_Law\\_Reform\\_Commission\\_on\\_Medicinal\\_Cannabis\\_Issues\\_Paper.pdf](https://amavic.com.au/publicassets/3267eb92-64c2-e611-80d2-005056be66b1/AMA_Victoria_submission_to_Victorian_Law_Reform_Commission_on_Medicinal_Cannabis_Issues_Paper.pdf)

has urged jurisdictions to take steps to regulate the product effectively to protect the health and safety of high risk populations and the public.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also urged doctors...

“to protect children from the harms of marijuana as the US becomes increasingly tolerant to the drug. The brain is not fully developed until around 25 years of age. Experts note that marijuana use in the young can lead to abnormal brain development. Frequent use of high-potency THC over extended periods of time suggests that there can be negative effects on learning, memory, attention and problem-solving ability, as reported in *Pediatrics* in October 2017. The AAP suggests that doctors urge parents not to use marijuana around children. Other concerns with children include the potential of exposing them to secondhand smoke and accidental poisoning with edibles such as brownies or candy.”<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

In summary, in response to the Inquiry into the use of Cannabis in Victoria, the ACL does not support any further legislative reform or relaxation of regulation of cannabis in view of the uncertain efficacy of medicinal cannabis and the potential for harm when cannabis is used as a recreational drug. In order to prevent young people and children from accessing and using cannabis, to protect public health and public safety in relation to the use of cannabis, and to prevent criminal activity relating to the illegal cannabis trade, it is best that the Victorian government keeps the current legislation unchanged.

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/ama-statements/ama-applauds-surgeon-general-s-advisory-cannabis>

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.drugs.com/illicit/marijuana.html>