

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4
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The voice of people
affected by cancer

Cancer Voices NSW Submission to Legislative Council's Inquiry into the use of cannabis for medical purposes

Cancer Voices NSW (CVN) welcomes the Legislative Council's Inquiry into the use of cannabis for medical purposes.

As the state level voice of people affected by cancer, we are pleased to again support the NSW Parliament's positive approach to this issue. Cancer Voices NSW strongly supports the use of cannabis for medical purposes, with appropriate safeguards for that use.

Cancer Voices NSW provides the independent voice of people affected by cancer, working to improve the cancer experience of the 40,000 people who are diagnosed each year. Established in 2000, we are active in the areas of diagnosis, information, treatment, research, support and care. To achieve this we work in partnership with providers of these services, ensuring the patient perspective is heard.

We also thank the Committee for making available the NSW Parliamentary Library's Research Service Review of progress in this area by other jurisdictions since the late 1990s. While the Carr Government was strongly in favour of coming to grips with the need to make medical cannabis available for people with serious illnesses, where there is evidence that symptoms associated with these illnesses respond well to the drug, we understand that it may have been a bit early to have successfully addressed concerns raised at that time.

The passing of some years has put us in a much better position be able to make informed decisions about how to safeguard access for people for whom this medicine is, or should be, prescribed. This period also enables us to benefit from new developments in its efficacious and safe delivery, as well as the experience of a number of other jurisdictions.

CVN wishes to ask the Committee that discussion about cannabis for medical purposes be conducted in as impartial a manner as possible, ensuring they remain within the usual discussion requirements for the approval of any medical-use drug.

We have noted the progress and processes reported in other jurisdictions such as the Netherlands, approximately one quarter of the United States and in Canada – experiences which should assist NSW and indeed, Australia, in getting it right.

General Comment re the use of medical cannabis for people with cancer:

Cancer Voices observes that cancer patients will benefit from the medical use of cannabis in two important aspects of their disease and its treatment;

- as an antiemetic, reducing vomiting and gastrointestinal discomfort caused by treatment
- as an analgesic to control or reduce chronic pain, caused by the progression of the disease.

Regarding further "gold standard" evidence, we suggest that it is unlikely that medical cannabis clinical trials will be offered to people with cancer while they are undergoing distressing treatment, or while dealing with the pain associated with the metastatic stage of cancer. We suggest that because these trials will not be run, due to lack of public funding or commercial interest, this situation should not be allowed to become, or be used by some parties as, an obstacle for applying current knowledge and common sense regarding the medical use of cannabis for alleviating suffering at various stages of this disease.

We also note that health concerns raised by those opposing this move are largely related to long term use by young and healthy people. For people with cancer, there is no suggestion that use of cannabis for medical reasons would pose a long term health risk, for obvious reasons, as it would be prescribed and used for specific symptoms only. It could be argued that if a person is dealing with severe and chronic pain due to late stage metastatic cancer, it would be hypocritical and misguided to suggest that they be denied such relief because of a very small chance of mild long-term damage.

We imagine the same principle would apply to the symptoms of other diseases and conditions where medical cannabis can be used to benefit patients' experience and to alleviate adverse effects of those diseases.

In conclusion and directly addressing the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry:

Cancer Voices NSW strongly supports the use of cannabis for medical purposes.

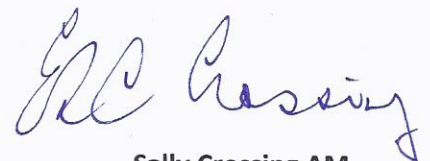
As advocates for people affected by cancer, and as a volunteer organisation comprised of people *with* cancer, we see our role as principally to examine and comment on what impact such use will have on people with cancer. We see major benefits, specifically for relief of symptoms and side effects which are often not well managed now. We fully support the placement of controls to ensure appropriate prescribing protocols and safe and efficient delivery to people for whom it has been prescribed.

We also recognise that the drafting of potential legislation will need to deal with legal implications. We strongly caution against the introduction of more emotive arguments, such as political or religious views and/or beliefs. This issue is neither a political or religious matter – it is about deciding how to allow access to a medicine, with due care to restrict such access to those who will benefit from it, as with any other drug used for medical purposes.

Cancer Voices commends our submission to you, and would be pleased to participate and contribute further if requested. Please contact Sally Crossing on 02 9436 1755.



Kathy Smith
Chair
18 January 2013



Sally Crossing AM
Deputy Chair