

BCCCS Presentation to the OCMA

Presented in Ottawa by Hilary Black on May 12, 2003

Introduction

Good morning. I am glad to have this opportunity to share with you some of the knowledge essential to the task before you. Thank you for having me.

The package before you contains reports, forms and other information answering some of your questions more thoroughly than I am able to in the limited time available here today.

In particular I want to point out the standards for medicinal cannabis distribution. This document outlines the framework for operating a successful cannabis dispensary and contains valuable information.

Values

I am going to read you our values and the philosophies that guide our work.

Developing a value-based foundation would assist this committee in your work and would answer many questions other stakeholders have about what you are working towards.

Club

This presentation will give you an overview of our organization, and answer some of your questions about our work.

The BC Compassion Club Society is a registered non-profit society. We have been successfully distributing medicinal

cannabis to those in need for six years. We currently serve a membership of 2500 and employ 42 staff.

Our organizational structure is non-hierarchical and we utilize a consensus model of decision-making.

Authorities

We are a functioning model of a community-based, cannabis distribution center with no government involvement. We have solid relationships with our neighbors and local authorities. Any concerns that they have had are not because of the services we provide, but because we are breaking the law.

The Vancouver police have left us in peace, only coming to the club when their assistance is requested. We have met with the head of the Drug vice squad, and have a mutual understanding.

The municipal government has never interfered in the delivery of our services and we are presently working together to develop a strategy for our expansion, in order to meet the overwhelming demand for our services.

We have also worked with government at the federal level. Former Federal health minister Allan Rock consulted with us in the original development phase of the MMAR regulations. The report we prepared for him is in your package.

We testified before the senate committee on illegal drugs, and met with the senators in our facilities. The Senates' recommendations pertaining to the Compassion Club and Health Canada are in your package.

Access, Eligibility & Requirements

Our method for determining who is eligible for membership is important for authorities to understand in order to feel comfortable with our organization.

Ultimately, we believe cannabis should be accessible and available in a similar manner as other medicinal herbs. Cannabis is a non-toxic and highly effective medicinal herb that can be safely self-prescribed and its dosage safely self-titrated.

Due to the current legal climate we require recommendations for cannabis from physicians, Naturopathic Drs, or Dr's of Traditional Chinese Medicine, or a Health Canada license. We believe practitioners of natural healthcare are more knowledgeable about the recommendation, dosage, and monitoring of herbal medicine.

Health care practitioners often refuse to recommend cannabis based legal concerns and pressure from their governing bodies, such as the CMA, and due to the stigma surrounding this herbal medicine.

While Allopathic Drs are the gatekeepers to medical cannabis, it is your responsibility to ensure Drs are educated, and empowered to recommend cannabis, so patients are not shamed and shut down as they ask for their support, as so often happens. Potential members have come to us in tears after requesting support for their use of medical cannabis, and being treated like a naughty teenager.

Drs are refusing to fill out both the MMAR and Compassion Club forms. Therefore, in some cases we accept members based on a confirmation of diagnosis, without a specific recommendation for cannabis faxed from the Drs office. Some Dr are more comfortable with this.

Please look at the physician statement, left side, second document, third page.

We verify each recommendation over the telephone and collaborate with Drs as necessary, particularly in regards to mental health patients.

Medical Community

The medical community sends us referrals every day, and we are consistently asked to present to a wide variety of organizations and institutions who want information regarding medical marijuana, such as: Multiple Sclerosis Society, HIV/AIDS societies, BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, Riverview Psychiatric Hospital, St. James Hospice, University of British Columbia, Capilano College, the Justice Institute, and groups of nurses and physicians.

Who our members are/Demographics

The medical community refers to us members from every walk of life. They range in age from 9-90

Uses

The vast range of symptoms and conditions for which we have received Dr recommendations is detailed in your package. The most common conditions are:

- HIV/AIDS,
- Cancer
- Multiple Sclerosis,
- Arthritis
- Chronic Pain
- Seizure disorders
- Glaucoma
- Hepatitis C
- Crohn's/Colitis/IBS
- Anxiety

- Depression
- Insomnia
- Anger Management
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse

Harm reduction

With access to cannabis and alternative healthcare, and support of the community at the Compassion Club, we have assisted people to overcome their addiction to heroin, cocaine, crack, methadone, alcohol, morphine, codeine and other prescription medications.

Education

Each new member is given an orientation session tailored to their condition. These hour and a half sessions cover:

- The basics about the plant
- The products available, such as baked goods and tinctures
- Techniques for safe use
- The variety of strains available and their effects

Please see the safe and effective of medicinal cannabis pamphlet in your package.

It is important to thoroughly educate members about the strains because cannabis from the Indica and Sativa families have very different cannabinoid profiles and therefore have very different effects. Armed with this information, members are able to relieve their symptoms effectively.

The following are general tendencies but effects vary from person to person:

Primarily, the effects of *Sativas* are on the mind and

emotions. In this regard they tend to stimulate, uplift, energize and enhance creativity. These benefits can be particularly helpful for the psychological component of many illnesses. *Sativas* are generally better for daytime use.

- Some reported benefits of Sativa strains are:
- reduces depression
- relieves headaches and migraines
- reduces awareness of pain
- reduces nausea
- stimulates appetite
- and is an expectorant

The effects of *Indicas* are predominantly physical although the relief of physical symptoms can have an emotional result as well. *Indicas* tend to relax, sedate, and reduce pain. *Indica* are generally best for later in the day and before bed.

- Some reported benefits of Indica strains are:
- relaxes muscles
- relieves spasms
- reduces inflammation
- aids in sleep
- reduces anxiety and stress
- reduces nausea
- stimulates appetite
- relieves headaches and migraines
- reduces intra-ocular pressure
- is an anti-convulsant
- reduces seizure frequency
- and is an expectorant

Hybrids or crosses are the result of cross-pollination of various strains. The characteristics, and the effects, of one strain will usually be dominant. For example, *Indica*-dominant crosses are good for pain relief, with the *Sativa* component helping with energy and activity levels, making it particularly effective for day-time pain relief.

We are beginning to identify particular varieties that are effective for sleep, pain, appetite and energy as well as for

other specific conditions. In the future, we will conduct research on strain and symptom correlations and will have cannabinoid profiles for our members so they can more accurately select the desired strain for the desired effects.

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Distribution

Our daily menu offers 7-10 varieties of cannabis, which can be accessed in person, through our home delivery service, or through our mail out program.

It is essential, for all our members to have access to a wide range of strains in order to effect a wide variety of symptoms and conditions. The prolonged use of a single strain will result in tolerance, while using a variety of strains will minimize the build up of therapeutic tolerance

It is important to have a variety of cannabis products available. These products include:

- Baked goods, some of which are wheat and sugar free, as many patients must avoid these ingredients in their diets.
- Hash, which provides a concentrated dose of cannabinoids, allowing members to consume less plant matter to obtain the desired effect.
- Tinctures and
- Cannabis infused oil and butter for cooking at home.

Note that the Access Regulations do not allow possession of hash, oil or tincture. This unreasonably restricts the ability to medicate effectively.

Members keep track of their own use in order to find the most effective strain and mode of ingestion. We also keep close records monitoring members purchases, in order to assist members to track their own consumption, and for us to prevent reselling and to encourage responsible use.

Each member may access the equivalent of five grams per day. Some people actually require more to control their symptoms and compassionate exceptions are made. Others may be using cannabis as an escape from emotional issues, or may have an increased tolerance from over use of a particular strain. For these members we offer access to counseling as an option for handling emotional issues. We also recommend a therapy, such as acupuncture or herbs, to assist in the relief of symptoms, therefore potentially lowering the quantity of cannabis required.

Cost

Cost of medicine is a huge concern for all Canadians, and is no different for users of cannabis.

We encourage our members to use the smallest quantity possible to minimize bronchial irritation and to reduce the cost of their medicine. The price of our cannabis ranges from \$5-\$10 a gram. Some of our growers give us compassionate prices, which are passed on to our members.

The price of cannabis is artificially inflated. Due to prohibition, the price is closer to the cost of gold, rather reflecting the actual cost of production, which is closer to the cost of tomatoes. There are times when members must choose between buying groceries and buying their cannabis. Rather than have food rotting in the fridge that they are too ill to eat, they buy their medicine.

Since most of our members are living on very low fixed incomes, we try to provide some of their medicine to them at no cost. Our donation program provides 2 grams per week to each member, while supplies last. With our growing membership and increase in poverty due to devastating provincial government cuts to the disability benefits, our program is not able to meet the need for free cannabis.

It is imperative that this medicine, like other medicines that are used for the same purposes, be covered by provincial health care insurance.

Supply

It is essential that medicinal cannabis is both affordable and of the highest quality. This means it must be free of chemicals, and micro-organisms.

Many people using medicinal cannabis have compromised immune systems, or chemical sensitivity and may be seriously harmed by consuming contaminated cannabis.

Compassion clubs reduce this, and other potential harms of procuring medicine on the black market. We have an arrangement with a laboratory willing to engage in civil disobedience in order to guarantee the cleanliness of our medicine.

The Compassion Club aims to have a 100% organic supply. We presently educate our growers on organic growing methods. Eventually we hope to see all cannabis dispensaries distributing only certified organic cannabis.

It is unnecessary for suppliers of medicinal cannabis to be certified botanists or horticulturists. The cultivation of high quality cannabis requires experience and dedication.

The producer's priority must be to create a high quality product, rather than high quantities, as is the priority with commercial growers. Medicinal growers will work with challenging strain that require more time and space to cultivate than commercial strains, although this increases their costs.

We give contracts to these compassionate growers who are growing high quality medicine and offer below black market prices. It is important in this legal climate of prohibition to have a verbal contract or written agreement

in order to verify the relationship in a court of law.

We prioritize purchasing from the few members who are also growers, as we are committed to their financial empowerment. Our members face many challenges in growing their own medicine:

- Setting up a medical grow facility requires a significant initial investment which is out of reach of many of our members
- Those living in poverty do not have extra space in their homes to dedicate to cultivation
- Most of our members do not own their homes, and have landlords to contend with. Even some of those with health Canada licenses have been threatened with eviction for cultivating their legal medicine.
- Some, who are home-owners have had their house insurance revoked.

We work with as many growers as necessary to fulfill the demand of quantity and variety of strains. It is preferable to work with a diverse group of growers in order to offer assurance of our supply.

The medicinal cannabis community is concerned that the only legal supply will be limited to one or a few government-approved producers. Competition in a free market, on the other hand, will increase the quality, broaden the selection, and decrease the end cost of the medicine.

The illegal work of the medical cannabis community must be legitimized, valued and protected.

Staffing

While the legal status of medicinal cannabis remains dubious, it is crucial employees of a cannabis dispensary fully understand the legal risk they are undertaking to

distribute medicinal cannabis.

Those distributing cannabis are not required to be healthcare professionals, however they should have should have experience with persons with disabilities, and be very familiar with cannabis.

It is important they have first aid training in be prepared to handle infected blood, seizures, strokes, falls, and mental health issues. They should also have an understanding of poverty and the surrounding issues, and be truly compassionate people.

Upon being hired at the Compassion Club employees are thoroughly educated regarding cannabis.

Wellness Centre

The Compassion Club also employees the practitioners of our Wellness Center: clinical Herbalists, clinical Counselors, a Nutritional Counselor, Doctors of Traditional Chinese Medicine, a Reiki practitioner, an Acupressure Massage Therapist, and a Yoga instructor.

These services are subsidized by the distribution of the cannabis. Members are charged on a sliding scale of \$3-\$30 for Wellness Center services.

Through our Wellness center, we encourage the holistic use of cannabis, one of many medicinal herbs, as we recognize that cannabis is generally not a cure, but a tool, which is a preventative medicine, provides symptom relief and improves the quality of life.

Community

The community aspects of the Compassion Club also

ameliorate the quality of life for our members.

We have a smoking lounge where our members can medicate in a safe space, leaving the fear and stigma of being a lawbreaker at the door. This is an environment that facilitates social support. Many of our members lived in isolation before becoming apart of our community, and the club has become their only social outlet. Members have become best friends, roommates, and even gotten married and begun a family.

The pharmacy model simply cannot provide the benefits of the environment or community we are able to provide.

Member Satisfaction

Our members appreciate the services we provide for them. They understand we are risking arrest, imprisonment, our ability to travel, to be employed, and our freedom, in order for them to have access to their medicine of choice.

They are satisfied with our services. Many times members have given us credit for saving their lives.

We have regular contact with our members, allowing us to note changes in their health and well being, and to answer any questions and address their concerns on an ongoing basis.

We have an environment of open and honest communication and encourage member feedback. This happens verbally, in writing, or at our monthly members meetings.

We also have a formal process for handling serious conflicts and complaints. We believe an environment of transparency and accountability is essential.

Recommendations

The following 9 recommendations address our current concerns, and those of medical users who feel this is not an inclusive, transparent or accountable process.

These recommendations are outlined in your package

1. Inclusiveness and Transparency

- The regulation have been unable to meet the needs of medical cannabis users both those with and with out licenses. As a result this program has been considered unconstitutional in the courts.
- In order to address the needs of medical cannabis users and meet the criteria set for the by the courts it is obvious this committee must have permanent inclusion of medical user and compassion club representatives.

2. Decentralization

- We recommend that like other natural health products and pharmaceutical medications, the lawful possession of medicinal cannabis should not require authorization from a centralized federal body.
- If cannabis is to be regulated within the healthcare system and require the input of a healthcare practitioner, the choice as to its use must be a health care decision made by both the patient and the health care practitioners. It is inappropriate for the government to interfere in this decision by limiting its use.

3. Practitioner Authorization

- We recommend that regardless of the condition in question, one recommendation from a general

practitioner or certified alternative healthcare provider, such as a Naturopathic Dr., or a Dr. of traditional Chinese Medicine, is sufficient authorization to legitimize use, or to access Health Canada's medicinal cannabis program.

- The current application process is far too onerous especially for non-terminal patients who must seek the support of one or two specialists. The specialist requirement also places an unnecessary burden on the healthcare system.

4. Costs

- The costs of medicinal cannabis must be subsidized by our healthcare system.
- It is essential that people be able to access their medicine of choice regardless of their level of income. Seriously ill people also tend to be those living in the most poverty. People who have obtained their doctor's recommendation for the use of cannabis have substantiated their medical need. This should be sufficient for cost coverage as is given for other prescription drugs.

5. Amnesty

- Medicinal cannabis users, distributors and their suppliers must be given amnesty immediately.
- Many have been and will continue be tied up in lengthy and expensive legal proceedings. These resources should be spent on providing suffering Canadians with access to medicinal cannabis, instead of fighting criminal charges. While the regulations regarding the supply and distribution of medicinal cannabis are being developed, prosecution of those doing this valuable work must end.

6. Legitimize Community-Based Distribution Centers

- All non-profit, Compassion Clubs should be licensed and accepted by all levels of government
- The Compassion Club model has been recognized by the Senate and many provincial judges for providing the services the government has so far failed to provide.
- Non-profit compassion societies provide a wealth of services, knowledge and experience the pharmacy model cannot recreate. The pharmacy model for the distribution of cannabis will not meet the needs of all medical cannabis users. Legitimizing non-profit distribution centers will provide those in need with access to valuable services and knowledge, save the government a significant amount of money, and will prevent commercialization of and profiteering off medicinal cannabis distribution.

7. Whole Plant Cannabis vs. Synthetic Pharmaceutical Products and Extracts

- It is crucial that medicinal users of Cannabis continue to have the choice to use the whole plant medicine.
- Our members have reported tremendously negative side effects from synthetic versions of the isolated active ingredients of cannabis. Were pharmaceutical companies able to replicate the exact ratios of all the active ingredients in Cannabis, many people would still prefer to use natural healthcare products.
- This right to choose natural health care products must be defended as an essential health care choice.
- The regulations mention pharmaceutical products and apply the language of pharmaceutical drugs to Cannabis. While it is evident that synthetic Cannabis is of great interest to the pharmaceutical industry, those interests should not supercede the interests of

the already existing and flourishing natural medicine industry.

8. Monopoly of Supply

- The plethora of experience and expertise regarding production within the medical cannabis community must be legitimized, valued and protected.
- We are concerned that the only legal supply will continue to be limited to one or a few approved producers. Competition, in a free market, on the other hand will increase the quality, broaden the selection, and decrease the end cost of the medicine.

9. Natural Health Product

- Cannabis is a natural health care product and should be regulated as one.

Conclusion

Compassion Clubs are stakeholders in the development of these regulations. We are actually providing access to this effective medicine, while members of this committee who are deeply invested in the status quo of prohibition, are influencing the creation of regulations, which cater to prohibition, not to a true healthcare agenda.

Community based, non-profit Compassion Clubs are an effective, affordable, sensible, and time proven way, not only to distribute medicinal cannabis, but also to provide suffering Canadians with valuable services no other model can offer.

The success of the Compassion Clubs in providing access to thousands of patients is possible because we believe that the prohibition of cannabis does not apply to those in

desperate need, nor to those providing their medicine.

The pharmacy model may work for some, but receiving a bottle of cannabis from a pharmacist without the education and support we offer, will certainly not work for most. We are not here to protect our livelihoods. I earn 14\$ hour. We are here because we are dedicated to the people whose lives you now hold in your hands.