

November 7, 2001

Testimony to The Special Senate Committee on Illegal Drugs

Introduction

I am Hilary Black; the Founder and Co-Director of the BC Compassion Club Society (BCCCS), as well as being a user of medicinal cannabis, and a registered member. I am honored to be here today to present to you, and to be representing the Compassion Club members, staff and board, and the greater cannabis community. I will be addressing 3 main points in my presentation.

- First, an overview of the Compassion Club as a model of a community based cannabis distribution center that is both an alternative and solution to prohibition.
- Second, the importance and necessity of autonomy within healthcare, and how it is compromised by prohibition.
- Third, a description of how prohibition creates social destruction and can be used as a tool to advance political and corporate agendas rather than addressing real health and social concerns.

The Compassion Club

The Compassion Club is a registered non-profit society; we have been distributing cannabis for medical use for four years. We have created a zone where prohibition does not exist in order to allow medicinal cannabis users to access cannabis without the fear and stigma of prohibition. We are a consensus-based organization that employs 28 staff, and serves a membership of 1600 people. The members have a huge range of conditions, such as: HIV/AIDS, Cancer, Multiple Sclerosis, Arthritis, Chronic Pain, Seizure disorders, Glaucoma, Hepatitis C, Anxiety, Depression, Insomnia, Eating disorders and many others.

To register as a member, we require a confirmation of diagnosis and a recommendation for cannabis from a Physician, Naturopathic Doctor, or Psychiatrist. If a Doctor will not sign a recommendation solely because she or he is uncomfortable with the legal status of cannabis or has concerns of professional retribution, we may register that patient without a Doctor's recommendation, depending on the diagnosis.

Our services are available six days a week. Our daily menu usually has 7-10 varieties of cannabis, 1 or 2 varieties of hash, cannabis tincture and baked goods. It is important that medicinal users have access to a variety of strains, as the effect of cannabis varies depending on which strain is being used and the method of ingestion. Our members are made aware of the differences and can then select the best strain of cannabis to most effectively treat their symptoms.

Indica and Sativa are the two main varieties of the cannabis plant used as medicine. There are many strains that are crosses of those two varieties. Within each of those varieties and crosses there are a huge number of individual strains, each with a different cannabinoid profile and effect. According to anecdotal evidence, the Indica strains are a relaxant, effective for anxiety, pain, nausea, appetite stimulation, sleep, muscle spasms and tremors, among other symptoms. The Sativa strains are more of a stimulant, effective in appetite stimulation, relieving depression, migraines, pain and nausea. We are now aware of specific strains that are effective for specific conditions and symptoms.

Members keep track of their use in order to find the most effective strain for themselves. 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. We have a smoking lounge where our members can smoke in a safe space, leaving the fear and stigma of being a lawbreaker at the door. Members from a range economic classes, with different medical conditions, provide incredible support for one another there.

Wellness Center

The Compassion Club provides access to the practitioners of our Wellness Center: 2 clinical Herbalists, 2 clinical Counselors, a Nutritional Counselor, a Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine, a Reiki practitioner, an Acupressure Massage Therapist, and a Yoga program. These services are subsidized by the distribution of the cannabis. Members are charged on a sliding scale of \$3-\$30 for Wellness Center services. Those who have more, pay more, those who have less, pay less. Through our Wellness center, we encourage the holistic use of cannabis, one of many medicinal herbs, as we recognize that cannabis is not a cure, but a tool, which is a preventative medicine, provides symptom relief and improves the quality of life.

Community Relationships

The BCCCS is dedicated to improving the quality of our community. For four years we have been a successful, functioning model of a community based, cannabis distribution center; with no government involvement. We have solid relationships with our neighbors, and any concerns that they have had are not because of the services we provide, but because we are breaking the law.

Regardless of the fact that we are engaged in civil disobedience daily, we have many positive interactions with the medical and social services sectors. 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, and the Justice Institute.

The local law enforcement community has generally been wonderfully supportive of us, they report to the media they "have bigger fish to fry" and we are a low priority. In the Vancouver area, the police are usually respectful of those carrying membership cards, and will not confiscate their medicine. They recognize that we exist in a gray area between the letter of the law, and the way in which the law is applied.

We contribute to the economy by providing income and benefits to 28 staff as well as income to a group of cannabis growers and their families. The provision of alternative healthcare through our Wellness Center to our members and staff prevents many doctor and emergency room visits, saving the healthcare system precious dollars. Also making valuable contributions to the medicinal cannabis community are Botanists, Chemists, Nurses, Doctors, Lawyers, Cultivation Experts and Health Administrators.

Testimonials and Anecdotal Data

Many of the experts that have presented to this committee have portrayed anecdotal data as insubstantial, but much of medical practice is built upon such case histories. We must also remember that humans have been using cannabis since the beginning of recorded history. There are no recorded deaths and as you have already heard from other witnesses, there is little evidence of biologic damage even among relatively heavy users. The opposition to decriminalizing cannabis has no toxicological foundation. Day in and day out at the Compassion Club, we see proof of the safety and efficacy of cannabis.

Gregg Cooper is a young man who was diagnosed with rapid onset Multiple Sclerosis only 4 years ago. Today he cannot bathe himself, dress himself or feed himself without cannabis to ease his muscle tremors and pain.

Vicky Nicholson has Multiple Sclerosis, Fibromyalgia, a serious joint and muscle disorder and is restricted to a wheelchair. Instead of living a life debilitated by these conditions, Vicky is a national marathon athlete, winning medals each time she races, and she attributes her amazing physical success to cannabis.

Michelle David is in her sixties, suffering from serious arthritis, among other conditions, and she is able to resist the pressure to move into a nursing home, resist the pressure to use morphine, and lives an independent, drug free life through her use of cannabis.

Many of our members cannot walk, eat, sleep, or work without cannabis. It is also an effective tool in harm reduction. With access to cannabis and alternative healthcare, and support of the community at the Compassion Club, we have assisted people addicted to heroin, cocaine, crack, methadone, morphine, codeine and alcohol to overcome their addictions.

Research

While it is unnecessary to spend valuable resources to find out whether or not cannabis is truly effective, there is much to learn about how cannabis provides so much relief for such a wide variety of symptoms. The BCCCS is positioned to execute research to gather valuable information, such as the relationship between the cannabinoid profiles of a number of strains, and the symptoms and conditions they affect. Many of our members are eager to participate in such a project. Placebos are not necessary or ethical in such studies, nor is animal testing.

We created a research proposal with a team of research scientists from Vancouver, however we were turned down because we refuse to facilitate a study using a placebo, or low quality, low potency, cannabis imported from the US National Institute of Drug Abuse. Any study attempting to prove the efficacy of cannabis as a medicine using such a low potency herb, or unknown strains, such as being grown by Plant Prairie Systems, is destined to fail. There is no need to import cannabis for research, considering the high quality and huge quantity of cannabis being produced in Canada.

The information we could gather is being requested by Doctors, patients, pharmaceutical companies, Plant Prairie Systems, and Health Canada, yet we are not financially empowered to facilitate this research. Health Canada's stated priority is to fund research that will result in the creation of patentable, marketable pharmaceutical products. These legal products can be used to fortify the oppression of access to unprocessed cannabis. Those who need medicinal cannabis must have the option to use manufactured products, or whole plant medicine, as they wish, not as determined by a political agenda.

Autonomy

One of our core values is to assist all people to be empowered in decisions regarding their healthcare. We believe people absolutely have the right to choose to use cannabis in its herbal form, to relieve their symptoms and to increase the quality of their life.

We believe that one does not have to be suffering with a chronic or debilitating illness in order to have a legitimate use of cannabis. Recreational cannabis use is using cannabis as a relaxant, a stimulant or

for its euphoric effects, instead of over-the counter drugs, coffee, alcohol or other legal and illegal recreational drugs. Cannabis is used in this manner in many other cultures. For many recreational cannabis users, their use is self-prescribed preventative medicine. Stress opens the door to illness; cannabis helps to keep that door shut.

Prohibition has created an artificial market for cannabis, and it is far more expensive than it should be. Many of our members are in a catch 22. They are too sick to eat so they spend their food money on cannabis because they would rather have herb to smoke than food that they are unable to eat. An end to prohibition would make it more affordable to buy both cannabis and food. Financial considerations are one of the reasons why patients must always have the right to grow their own medicine, wherever and with whomever they choose. It is also one of the reasons that a monopoly on growing and distribution of medicinal cannabis cannot be allowed.

Corporate Monopoly

Unfortunately, prohibition is now a tool that can be used to empower corporations instead of people by banning the use of the plant in its natural form, while patients are forced to use manufactured products. We hope to see the evolving legal environment create room for community-based distribution centers. The pharmacy model will not work for everyone. People need access to the support and the services provided by distribution centers such as ours, and the healthcare system needs the relief.

Canadians must always have the right to choose whole plant medicine over pharmaceutical derivatives and must have access to herbal medicine that is not controlled by pharmaceutical companies.

As medicinal cannabis becomes a new legal industry in Canada, it will become either a government or corporately controlled monopoly, or it will become a sustainable, efficient, fair cottage industry. As it stands now, Plant Prairie Systems is positioned as the sole legal producer of medicinal cannabis. Economically and ethically, this monopoly is unacceptable.

Prohibition is even causing problems for Plant Prairie Systems in accessing seeds. Instead of working with legitimate and respected Canadian seed companies, a scheme has been concocted whereby seeds that have been confiscated by the police are being handed over and grown out by Plant Prairie Systems. In an attempt to keep bureaucratic hands clean, the breeding work of the cannabis community is being stolen, while we continue to be persecuted and oppressed.

This kind of hypocrisy is prolific. The new dangerous viral storage facility in Winnipeg is a level 4 security while the mine in Flin Flon where they are growing out the stolen seeds is level 7 security. This is not to protect the children in the neighbourhood; this is to protect the fear of cannabis, which generates support for prohibition.

The Political Agenda's Influence on Medicinal Cannabis Regulations

The highly charged political environment caused by prohibition has created a situation where the political agenda has been prioritized over real healthcare concerns. Prohibition has muddied the waters for those creating the regulations for access to medical cannabis, and the regulations pander to prohibition, rather than creating an effective, rational program.

Placing the doctors in the position of gatekeeper is solely to ensure that medicinal access doesn't look like decriminalization. Doctors don't want to control access to cannabis; many of them recognize cannabis as a natural health product, which is not their area of expertise. Meanwhile, the bureaucrats in Ottawa are overriding Doctors' orders to grant access to cannabis anyway, it is a charade.

Doctors should not be the gatekeepers, unless their involvement is for the purpose of establishing that the medical system will be covering the costs. A bill has been recently passed in Holland, which allows for medical users to have the costs of their cannabis covered by the government. As in Holland, people should also be able to access cannabis outside of the medical system, if they choose not to pursue subsidy.

Unlike in Holland, the new exemption regulations from Health Canada require the creation and maintenance of an expensive, unnecessary bureaucracy. These regulations are far more extensive, invasive, difficult to administer and enforce than regulations for any other prescription drug or natural medicine. The new regulations are akin to shooting a fly with a cannon. Patients are not allowed to choose cannabis as their first treatment choice, they must consider, or try, all of the allopathic techniques first. Some epileptics would have to at least consider undergoing a lobotomy in order to apply for an exemption

Evidence of Hypocrisy

The government is behaving like a two-headed beast. Police who have come to the Compassion Club have told me what great work we are doing, and have, on one occasion, protected a safe full of cannabis on our behalf, and I have had a police gun held to my head for being at a growing facility. While I met with the Federal Health Minister, Alan Rock, giving recommendations and information Health Canada had requested from us,

the RCMP raided a greenhouse that was growing low, cost organic cannabis for the Compassion Club.

While I am here before you, sharing our information as experts in the distribution of medicinal cannabis, my colleagues risk arrest, imprisonment, their ability to travel, to be employed, and their freedom, in order to distribute cannabis to those in need.

Conclusion

Prohibition is not protecting Canadians from the evils of cannabis; prohibition is destroying Canadians lives. The stigma, shame and criminal record can ruin ones ability to succeed in life, families are torn apart by children being seized, or a parent may be taken away. So many good people are caged in jail, people we need in our society. The laws, not the plant, cause what violence there may be around cannabis.

And now prohibition is empowering corporations to have exclusive control over an area of medicine that they know very little about, while those with experience continue to be persecuted. There is no valid justification for this government to spend such a massive quantity of resources to control a non-harmful herb.

I use cannabis regularly; it keeps me healthy. I sell cannabis because it helps others to have health. I am tired of being judged as a criminal while being called on as a resource: by you, by the federal government, the medical system, the universities and those in desperate need. I am tired of watching lives being destroyed, tired of knowing that sick and healthy folks are being harassed and abused by police, and I am tired of watching my community live in fear.

When you hear the words "war on drugs", have no doubt; it is a war. It may not be a foreign war fought with bombs, or one which makes the news each night, but it is a war none the less, a dirty domestic war, waged against Canadians every day. We will not stop resisting until it is over.

I implore you to do everything in your power to end this unjust and destructive war on our community. We simply want to be left in peace.