

MEDIA RELEASE
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RACP on medical cannabis: precaution prioritised above compassionate care – industry body responds

Australia's peak medical cannabis industry group, the Medical Cannabis Council, today said the Royal Australian College of Physicians (RACP) reticence towards medical cannabis disregards patient and international experience.

In its recent paper on the use of cannabinoids, published in the Medical Journal of Australian (19 February 2018), the RACP stated there was a need for more research and testing before doctors prescribe medical cannabis to patients. The paper cites safety and efficacy as a reason for its overly cautious approach.

While the Medical Cannabis Council agrees more research, testing and proper approval processes are required to continue to support the already robust case for cannabis as a therapeutic good, the RACP's prohibitive stance on life-saving medication sends the wrong message and may hinder the important progress already made on medical cannabis.

The Medical Cannabis Council said it was disappointing the article comes at a time when Australians who are desperate for access to medical cannabis are finding this legal product nearly unattainable due to complex access.

Medical Cannabis Council board member and leading cardiologist Dr Ross Walker said the benefits of medical cannabis are well known.

"All the trials to date have been supportive of medical cannabis as effective in the treatment of epilepsy, pain and other conditions," Dr Walker said.

Although he acknowledges there has not yet been any "gold standard" (large, long term, randomised, double blind) clinical trials in this field, medical cannabis has been proven to work for patients with various conditions.

Dr Walker also stressed the need for an effective alternative to opiates, considering a growing number of overdoses in the community.

"Australia is currently facing a significant problem with prescription narcotics and desperately needs an alternative to tackle this problem head on," Dr Walker said.

"Medical cannabis is a real alternative that needs to be looked into and taken seriously now by all specialists."

In a response to the RACP, published in Fairfax Media, Professor Iain McGregor wrote that the RACP fails to mention the benefits of medical cannabis in slowing down opiate use.

"Also neglected is the fact that in parts of the US where medicinal cannabis is available, there has been a 25 per cent reduction in deaths due to prescription opioids, as well as a reduction in the use of prescription drugs such as benzodiazepines and antidepressants," Professor McGregor said.

"Cannabis is a drug that is used by more than 100 million people every year, none of whom die as a result. In contrast, prescription opioids alone resulted in the deaths of more than 40,000 Americans in 2016."

Further, the RACP has claimed cannabis is no more effective for pain than placebo. Professor McGregor asserts this is patently false.

"When asserting this claim, the published piece cites two authoritative recent reviews from the US – reviews that in fact concluded the opposite," Professor McGregor said.

“Some 20 per cent of Australians suffer chronic pain and surveys show self-medication... are major drivers of illicit cannabis use.”

“Those in unremitting pain are precisely the people who need their specialist doctors to have a nuanced and accurate knowledge of cannabinoid science.”

“The RACP talks of a ‘precautionary principle’ and ‘do no harm’ – but in misrepresenting the facts of medicinal cannabis it promulgates a great deal of harm.”

- ENDS -

Professor Iain McGregor is academic director of the Lambert Initiative for Cannabinoid Therapeutics in the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney, and a founding member of the Medical Cannabis Council.

The Medical Cannabis Council is Australia's peak national industry association representing cultivators, manufacturers, distributors, ancillary organisations, education and advocacy groups, researchers and more. The Council fosters national and international coordination and cooperation to promote the research, production, access and use of medical cannabis products. The Council is the respected voice of the burgeoning industry, with members comprised of leading businesses and organisations ranging from large multinationals to Australian start-ups.

More information

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