

# PAPEI POSITION STATEMENT REGARDING THE LEGALIZATION OF CANNABIS IN PEI

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## WHO WE ARE:

The **Psychological Association of Prince Edward Island (PAPEI)** is a leading provincial mental health association comprised of Psychologists, Psychological Associates, Psychologist Candidates, Psychological Associate Candidates and Psychological Academics. Primary functions of PAPEI include making contributions to informed, evidence-based discussions of issues, practices, and approaches within the science of psychology as well as larger social policy issues and human management concerns in the province. In concert with our national partner, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA), the members of PAPEI are committed to working with government and other health and science stakeholders in advocating for evidence-based public policy that best meets the needs of the public we serve. Many PAPEI members are actively engaged in the provision of direct psychological assessment, treatment, and consultative services to children, adolescents, and adults across Prince Edward Island via both public and private practices.

## THE ISSUE:

The Government of Canada has now actively committed to legalizing cannabis for recreational use in 2018. It is the above functions and roles which have compelled PAPEI members to **strongly advocate for serious consideration of evidence-based information by the public as well as provincial and municipal policy leaders and politicians who each have the very real opportunity to impact on decisions in their jurisdictions stemming from the federal government's initiative.** As outlined in the Government of PEI's Cannabis Legislation webpage ([www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/service/have-your-say-cannabis-legislation](http://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/service/have-your-say-cannabis-legislation)), provincial and municipal areas of jurisdiction in this matter include the following: final legal age of access, levels of possession, and location of legal consumption; retail locations and rules; distribution, wholesaling, land use and zoning; impaired driving; taxation; and ultimately, public health and education considerations. It is PAPEI's assertion that such decision making influence has the power to directly impact aspects of future mental and physical health in the province.

## RELEVANT RESEARCH:

As recently outlined by PEI's Chief Public Health Office (Gaudreau, Sanford, & Sabapathy, 2017), self-reported data on substance use indicates that many Islanders use cannabis. Akin to other Canadian jurisdictions, adult past year usage was 10.7%. Student (grade 7 – 12) past year usage was in the range of 25 to 30% with over 50% of youth cannabis usage in PEI beginning before the age of 16 years. Youth use increases in step with school grade advancement. National research indicates that Atlantic and Western provinces in Canada report higher youth usage than other regions (Health Canada, 2012).

Canadian research suggests that as perceptions of harm related to cannabis use decreases, the frequency of cannabis use increases in youth (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2015). Perhaps not surprisingly then, our members recently report an increasing number of conversations with youth and adult patients where cannabis use decisions are linked to ill-informed perceptions of potential harm from cannabis in the face of imminent legalization. Recent clinical examples of this include: (a) situations where adolescents are turning down use of evidence-based medications and/or psychotherapy in

favour of using cannabis to "treat" their mental health disorders (for which there is little peer reviewed evidence); (b) parents giving ambivalent or even positive messages to their children about the potential effects of cannabis on education, health, or driving; (c) episodes of parents using cannabis with their youth as it is perceived as non-harmful or even helpful; and (d) clinical cases where youth state they will attempt to stop "heavy" street drugs, but continue to use cannabis because it is "low-risk". Stories such as these are greatly concerning given a substantial body of health research indicates that early and regular cannabis use is linked to the potential of both health and social harms.

Recent public position papers prepared by the Canadian Psychological Association (2017), the Canadian Psychiatric Association (2017), the Canadian Medical Association (2016), and the Canadian Paediatric Society (2016) outline the following evidence-based findings of cannabis related harms, among others:

- Regular or heavy cannabis use in adolescence is related to poorer educational outcomes, lower income, suicidality, greater welfare dependence and unemployment, as well as lower relationship and life satisfaction.
- Acute cannabis use is associated with an increased risk of motor vehicle collisions, especially for fatal collisions.
- Functional imaging shows clear differences between cannabis users and non-cannabis users in several areas of the brain.
- Cannabis use can disrupt normal adolescent brain maturational changes which typically continue until at least the mid-20s. This makes adolescence and young adulthood particularly vulnerable periods of potential negative influence from cannabis effects including increased likelihood of Substance Use Disorders.
- Heavy or chronic cannabis use adversely affects cognitive performance on measures that assess attention, working memory, verbal memory, and executive functioning.
- Verbal learning, memory, and attention are most consistently impaired by acute and chronic cannabis use, and in youth, some of these effects may remain even after cannabis use is discontinued.
- Cannabis use is linked with an earlier age of onset for psychosis, and the risk of psychosis onset is greater at higher levels of cannabis use.
- There is a modest positive relationship between cannabis use and the onset of depression, bipolar disorder and anxiety. In all studies, associations are stronger with heavier cannabis use.
- Higher potency cannabis (i.e., higher level of tetrahydrocannabinoid; THC) can result in significantly worse mental health and cognitive outcomes.
- Consuming cannabis infused edibles may inadvertently result in toxicity because absorption can take hours resulting in individuals who may overconsume because they do not initially feel any effects.
- Since legalization in the state of Colorado, rates of unintentional edible consumption of cannabis resulting in overdose symptoms among young children have increased by 34%.
- Early and heavy use of cannabis increases the potential for adult dependence to cannabis, including Cannabis Use Disorder, and, in the context of early, high frequency use, may be associated with other illicit substance use.
- Prenatal cannabis exposure is a significant public health concern given possible adverse effects on later child cognitive, behavioral, academic functioning as well as the associated negative effects of parental drug dependence on family environments of children.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Legalization and regulation of cannabis use is anticipated to increase consumption of cannabis in the province of PEI (Gaudreau, Sanford, & Sabapathy, 2017) with the potential for increased negative health and social effects as well as increased health care funding costs. The above findings should compel policy, clinical, and political leaders in Prince Edward Island to review their relevant areas of jurisdiction for opportunity to reduce possible societal harms. The following are

important recommendations stemming in part from recent reviews by the four national health advocacy groups noted above:

- Evidence-based information should be applied when making decisions on cannabis THC potency in provincial sales.
- Significant policy and financial support is needed for public health education and resources, including awareness of potential harmful effects of cannabis use. Special attention should be given to groups such as adolescents, young adults, licensed drivers, individuals vulnerable to mental health disorders, and potential and current parents with the potential to expose children and adolescents to cannabis effects. Educational campaigns highlighting risks related to cannabis use should be created by experts in the area of public communication and with attention to research on the effectiveness of such campaigns. Youth campaigns should be developed in collaboration with youth leaders and should include messages from young opinion-leaders.
- Develop a provincial mental health and addictions fund targeting activities related to mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment funded directly from provincial taxation of cannabis products and potential provincial profits of the four proposed government owned retail locations as well as the e-commerce platform. This fund should be overseen by representatives from research and clinical health professions. The development of such a fund would show serious provincial leadership and commitment to the reduction of the public health impact of cannabis legislation in this province.
- Regular screening for problematic cannabis use and co-morbid mental health problems with validated tools should be implemented throughout PEI public health services.
- Such screening then needs to be linked to provision of timely treatment with trained service providers, using evidence-based approaches. Various evidence-based psychological treatments such as Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, or a combination of both, as well as Contingency Management (i.e., voucher-based incentives for negative urine tests), and Multidimensional Family Therapy for adolescents have been shown to be effective interventions for cannabis use problems. **Public access to trained service providers in the areas of mental health and addictions, such as psychologists, is a particularly critical need in the face of this federal legislation.**
- Funding is needed to support important clinical research on cannabis related issues such as the complex relationships between cannabis use and mental disorders among various populations, and the effects of legalization of cannabis on the incidence and prevalence of mental health and addiction problems and disorders, as well as driving and motor vehicle accidents in the province of PEI.
- Enact and enforce municipal and provincial regulations on the cannabis industry to limit the availability, marketing, and promotion of cannabis to children and youth in our Island communities including prohibiting the sale of cannabis products via retail or self-service displays/devices within short distances of schools, licensed child care facilities, community centres, residential neighbourhoods and youth facilities, events, and public venues.
- Continue to monitor cannabis industry movements, in particular with respect to targeting youth in PEI who are vulnerable to industry influence, and take proactive steps to counteract this influence.

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