Speaking Points for Dr. Amy Porath
Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

Standing Committee on Health, Study of Bill C-45, Cannabis Act

Ottawa, Ontario, September 13, 2017

Good afternoon Mr. Chair and members of the Committee. My name is Dr. Amy Porath, and I am the Director of Research and Policy at the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, or CCSA. CCSA was created in 1988. We are Canada’s only agency with a legislated national mandate to reduce the harms of alcohol and other drugs on Canadian society.

We welcome the opportunity to speak to you today on the topic of age for legal possession of cannabis and impact of legalization on youth. CCSA’s subject matter expertise on cannabis is founded on the research, policy advice and knowledge mobilization we have produced on cannabis since making it a priority area of focus for us since 2008.

The issue of cannabis legalization is of great interest to our organization and we believe we are well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to the discussion of Bill C-45.

In respect of time constraints, my presentation today will be brief. CCSA submitted a brief on Bill C-45 in advance of our appearance today, and this brief addresses issues beyond the topic of youth. We would be pleased to speak to other areas covered in the brief at another time if the Committee would like further information.

As many of you may already know, Canadian youth have among the highest rates of cannabis use in the world.

Despite a decrease in use among youth in recent years, cannabis remains the most commonly used illegal drug among Canadian youth aged 15 to 24.

Canadian youth aged 15–24 are more than twice as likely to have used cannabis in the past year as compared to adults aged 25 and higher. Youth are also at greater risk of experiencing harms associated with cannabis use than adults because adolescence is a time of rapid brain development. The risks associated with use increase the earlier youth begin to use and the greater the frequency and quantity of cannabis they consume.

Accordingly, delaying the onset of use of cannabis, and reducing the frequency, potency, and quantity of cannabis used, can reduce this risk.

An important point I want to make today is that when we speak of a comprehensive approach to reducing cannabis use among youth, we refer to regulatory tools but, equally importantly, we also
speak of a comprehensive, evidence-informed approach to prevention and public education. I will speak more on this latter point shortly.

First, minimum legal age of access is an important component of a comprehensive approach to reducing youth cannabis use. Given the number of youth aged 18-24 who currently use cannabis illegally, the increased risk of health impacts must be considered alongside the risks associated with the continued use of cannabis obtained outside the regulated market. Setting the legal limit at 18 years of age at the federal level means that young people will not face adult criminal charges for cannabis possession.

Setting the age at 18 also provides the opportunity for provinces and territories to set additional regulations that can discourage use without the harms of criminal justice involvement. For example, provinces may consider increasing the age of cannabis access from 18 to 19 to align with the minimum legal drinking age in most provinces. This provides a consistent message to youth of legal age that we trust them to use impairing and potentially harmful substances in a responsible way.

A second regulatory tool that is an important component of a comprehensive approach to reducing youth cannabis use is pricing. We know that youth are price-sensitive. Evidence from the alcohol literature indicates that standardized minimum pricing is an effective mechanism for reducing overall levels of alcohol consumption, and that indexing or setting the price according to product potency - in the case of cannabis, by level of THC - can incentivize the use of lower-risk products. Ongoing analysis will be important to ensure that pricing maintains a balance between reducing consumption and encouraging diversion to the illegal market.

In addition to these regulatory considerations, there is also a need for a comprehensive, evidence-informed approach to prevention and education in order to provide young Canadians with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed decisions about their personal use of cannabis. Accumulating evidence suggests that a multi-faceted approach, one which involves several components such as programming in schools, resources for parents and families, community interventions, and mass media, will help to maximize outcomes among our youth. A comprehensive approach to prevention and education also requires proactive and ongoing investment, as well as monitoring and evaluation to ensure that it is having the desired impact.

CCSA has conducted focus groups with youth to understand their perceptions of cannabis and cannabis use. In these discussions, youth told us that they want information about risk that is linked to tangible outcomes – and they want harm reduction strategies so that they can reduce those risks if they do decide to use cannabis. The evidence indicates – and we have heard directly from youth – that they want to hear both sides of the story on cannabis – the benefits and the harms. To that end, education and prevention initiatives need to incorporate what we heard from youth in order to be impactful.

We also know youth continue to hold fast to certain misconceptions about cannabis, including the perception that everyone is using cannabis all of the time. We have also heard during our focus groups with youth that while they recognize that drinking and driving is dangerous, they don’t see cannabis the same way. We know through our focus groups as well as broader research that young people are influenced by the internet, media and public discourse on cannabis. Therefore, clear, consistent, and factual information that addresses myths and misperceptions is essential to cut through the many sources and types of information and messages that youth are daily exposed to
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about cannabis. Such information will help to establish actual social norms that lower, rather than promote, use.

We also know from our research that youth want to receive information from sources they trust who can speak credibly about cannabis, and depending on age, that includes parents and educators, but perhaps most importantly it includes peers. A comprehensive approach to prevention, therefore, means providing the needed training, resources and consistent messaging for parents, educators, healthcare providers, coaches, youth allies, and peers. It is also involves providing youth with the skills to critically evaluate the information they are receiving, and this can include digital and media literacy.

It is also important for a comprehensive approach to include targeted messaging regarding high-risk cannabis use in order to assist young people in making informed decisions and reduce harms. This includes information about the effects of frequent and heavy use; use at an early age; use in combination with other substances; use by youth with mental health conditions; and young women who are pregnant.

In conclusion, regulations, prevention and public education can work together to promote healthy decisions among youth by increasing awareness of risk and awareness of strategies for risk reduction. Effective prevention and public education requires clear, accurate and consistent messaging that is targeted and relevant to the key audiences, and needs to be delivered by trusted messengers.

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak today on this issue of vital importance to Canadians, and I will be pleased to respond to your questions.