July, 2017

Dear Concerned Community Member:

With the federal government set to legalize marijuana on or before July 1, 2018, many medical associations, mental health organizations, community groups, and family members and those living with schizophrenia or psychosis are expressing grave and deep concerns about what the public does not know about cannabis and the very paramount importance of safeguarding the mental wellness of youth and young adults as the legislation becomes law.

The government’s legislation sets 18 as the basic age for purchase and consumption, but allows provinces to raise that to coincide with their age limits for alcohol consumption. So why such grave and deep concern? Well, listen to some of the experts:

“There is a strong evidence-base showing that early and regular cannabis use can affect cognition, such as memory, attention, intelligence and the ability to process thoughts and experiences.” Dr. Renuka Prasad, President of the Canadian Psychiatric Association.

“Cannabis with high tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content can result in significantly worse mental health and cognitive outcomes, including worsening of panic disorder and other anxiety disorders.” Dr. Phil Tibbo, Chair of the Canadian Consortium for Early Intervention in Psychosis.

“We now have international data that support the fact that cannabis is a risk factor for psychosis for some, though not all, patients with schizophrenia, and those patients with a positive cannabis history need help to understand the negative effect of cannabis on psychosis.” Dr. Elsie-Marie Løberg, University of Bergen in Norway.

“The link between using pot and developing serious mental illness is strongest in the youngest smokers - 12- to 15-year-olds, or kids even younger.” Dr. Matthew Large, University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

“Simply put, cannabis should not be used by young people. It is toxic to their cortical neuronal networks, with both functional and structural changes seen in the brains of youth who use cannabis regularly.” Diane Kelsall, Interim Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Medical Association Journal.

The Canadian Paediatric Society cautions that marijuana use in youth is strongly linked to “cannabis dependence and other substance use disorders; the initiation and maintenance of tobacco smoking; an increased presence of mental illness, including depression, anxiety and psychosis; impaired neurological development and cognitive decline; and diminished school performance and lifetime achievement.”

The Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the Canadian Academy of Geriatric Psychiatry, the Canadian Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, and the Canadian Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine also believe that the government’s cannabis legislation fails to protect Canada’s youth!

The bottom line is that the “endocannabinoid system” is involved in brain development, even during the adolescent time period where the ‘fine tuning’ occurs. The cannabinoid receptors for this system are primarily on white matter in adolescents and not in their adult configuration (more on grey matter) until adulthood. This is why cannabis can have a different effect on the brain developmentally in adolescents than in adulthood.
Dr. Candice Crocker of the Nova Scotia Early Psychosis Program and Dr. Phil Tibbo who is also a board member of the SSC and Chair of the SSC Foundation state: 1. Cannabis use can contribute to the development of psychosis. 2. Cannabis use may worsen symptoms of depression. 3. Cannabis use can worsen symptoms of anxiety. 4. Regular use of cannabis can impair cognitive function. 5. Cannabis use can affect brain development.

That is why I am writing you as a family member whose brother developed cannabis induced psychosis leading to schizophrenia and as CEO of the Schizophrenia Society of Canada (SSC). As millions can testify, psychotic illnesses are horrible for the people who have them, and terrible for their families, too. What else does the public need to know?

The human brain continues to develop until around the age of 25. Use of cannabis prior to that age can negatively affect the brain’s healthy maturation process. Many professionals believe that Canadians should not have legal access to marijuana until age 21, and that legislation should restrict the quantity and potency of the drug until they are 25.

Therefore, the Schizophrenia Society of Canada joins the Canadian Psychiatric Association in calling for: (1) public education targeting youth and young adults about the effects early cannabis use can have on brain development; (2) further research to better understand the impact of cannabis and its legalization on mental health; (3) expanded support for prevention, early identification and cannabis cessation treatments within the framework of mental health and addictions; and (4) prudent consideration of advertising and marketing guidelines with clear markings of THC and cannabidiol content, as well as consistent public health warning messaging.

Your generous donation can assist the Schizophrenia Society of Canada in getting this information out to provincial policy decision makers through our advocacy efforts. Your donation can assist us in creating effective ways in getting this information out to young families and to youth and emerging adults so at least they can make informed decisions. SSC is not debating legalization or criminalization or the medicinal use of cannabis.

We want to prevent unnecessary mental illness and mental health problems and the interruption of young developing brains. Help us protect Canada’s youth as we work in partnership with organizations like the Canadian Consortium for Early Intervention in Psychosis.

Your gift will enable us to develop informational literature and social media apps for families and youth to become aware and informed in their decision making around the use of cannabis and its affects upon the developing brain.

Your generous donation can make a difference!

Sincerely,

Chris Summerville, D.Min., CPRP CEO,
Schizophrenia Society of Canada