

Use of Cannabis for Medicinal Purposes

In relation to use of cannabis for medicinal purposes, NZNO supports evidence based medicine and nursing and a harm minimization approach to symptom control. Evidence based means effective and proven treatments to manage symptoms and pain that is supported by scientific research and legislation.

Introduction

Green MP Metiria Turei has lodged a member's bill proposing an amendment to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1975 to decriminalize use of cannabis for medicinal purposes. The bill would allow cardholders to consume, smoke and possess a certain amount of cannabis. Cardholders would require evidence of suffering from a list of conditions – recognised as benefiting from medicinal cannabis use, including for example Aids wasting syndrome, glaucoma and epilepsy. In order to effectively respond to the likely upcoming debate in New Zealand, NZNO has developed this Policy Statement.

Context

Use of cannabis for medicinal purpose is a fast-developing area of discussion, debate and research worldwide. A number of published articles suggest that there are benefits of cannabis use as a therapy for people living with HIV / AIDS and cancer relieving nausea, vomiting and increasing appetite (Banks 2007), multiple sclerosis and epilepsy as an anti-spasmodic (Rotblatt & Zajicek, 2006) and rheumatoid arthritis relieving chronic pain (Chrubasik & Blake, 2006).

Research suggests that, despite considerable legal barriers people use marijuana for therapeutic purposes (DeBondt, 2006). Much of the debate and recent pharmaceutical research is focused on the method of cannabis use (i.e. smoking, inhaling or a synthetic version), the risks of smoking cannabis (Zickler, 2006) its psychoactive effects i.e. euphoric qualities (Degenhardt & Hall 2006) and how to effectively manage dosage. This research continues although it is suggested that a spray form is being developed as the "best option for effectively delivering the dose fast, managing dosage and minimising side-effects" (NZ Drug Foundation, 2006).

NZNO supports evidence based medicine and nursing and harm minimisation. Within this context, NZNO supports continued research into the benefits of cannabis for medical use, and alternative delivery systems.

Medicinal cannabis use is controlled under legislation. The Medicines Act (1981) and the Misuse of Drugs Act (1975) both contain exemptions that would enable a doctor to lawfully prescribe or administer cannabis, a controlled drug, to a patient, provided Ministerial approval is given. However, this approach is not well known or used. Green MP Metiria Turei has lodged a member's bill proposing an amendment to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1975 to decriminalize use of cannabis for medicinal purposes. The bill would allow cardholders to consume, smoke and possess a certain amount of cannabis. Cardholders would require evidence of suffering from a list of conditions – recognised as benefiting from medicinal cannabis use, including for example Aids wasting syndrome, glaucoma and epilepsy.

NZNO members will administer legally prescribed medicines. However, NZNO is concerned on two counts with the proposed bill:

1. That dosage of any medication can be appropriately measured. Nurses will be required to sign that a certain dosage has been administered and that the therapeutic range of medication is achieved; and
2. That nurses will not be placed in the invidious position of controlling and monitoring leaf form cannabis use in clinical environments where the general public may be exposed to smoking.

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Mission statement

NZNO is committed to the representation of members and the promotion of nursing and midwifery. NZNO embraces Te Tiriti o Waitangi and works to improve the health status of all peoples of Aotearoa/ New Zealand through participation in health and social policy development.

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NZNO Practice position statement:

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