



Submission to

Senate Community Affairs References Committee

*Senate inquiry into the current barriers to patient
access to medicinal cannabis in Australia*

January 2020

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submission

Introduction

The Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union (QNMU) thanks the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to comment on the *Senate inquiry into the current barriers to patient access to medicinal cannabis in Australia* (the inquiry).

Nursing and midwifery is the largest occupational group in Queensland Health and one of the largest across the Queensland government. The QNMU is the principal health union in Queensland covering all classifications of workers that make up the nursing and midwifery workforce including registered nurses (RN), registered midwives (RM), enrolled nurses (EN) and assistants in nursing (AIN) and students who are employed in the public, private and not-for-profit health sectors including aged care.

Our more than 61,000 members work across a variety of settings from single person operations to large health and non-health institutions, and in a full range of classifications from entry level trainees to senior management. The vast majority of nurses and midwives in Queensland are members of the QNMU.

This year, 2020 will be dedicated to celebrating the International year of the Nurse and Midwife, in celebration of the 200th year anniversary of the birth of the founder of contemporary nursing, Florence Nightingale. The World Health Organisation (WHO) nominated Nurses and Midwives for their invaluable contribution to health care and to highlight the need for a strengthened Nursing and Midwifery workforce to achieve sustainable development goals (SDG) and universal health coverage. The QNMU is proud to embrace this opportunity to invest in the Nursing and Midwifery professions, particularly the investment into minimum safe staffing ratios and skill mix across all health sectors.

Legislation allows for nurses and midwives to possess, administer, supply and issue lawfully obtained cannabis-based products that are supplied by the patient for them to use in hospital (Queensland Government, 2018). As such, the QNMU supports the Committee in examining the current barriers that patients face when accessing medicinal cannabis in Australia.

The QNMU will address one of the terms of reference - *(n) any related matters*.

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Nurses and midwives provide safe, appropriate and responsive care within their scope of practice and this includes caring for patients who have been prescribed medicinal cannabis products. The prescription of medicinal cannabis can be used in the treatment of medical conditions such as multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, chronic non-cancer pain; chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting in cancer; and palliative care (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2019).

Education and public awareness campaigns for the general public and training for health practitioners is key for the future use of medicinal cannabis products in Australia. We support training for nurses and midwives that increases their awareness and informs them about medicinal cannabis. This education should include:

- Current regulatory framework and legislation;
- Modes of action, pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics;
- Therapeutic and non-therapeutic effects;
- Adverse effects and drug interactions; and
- Roles and responsibilities for nurses and midwives.

We also believe education will assist in reducing the stigma around medicinal cannabis in demonstrating that medicinal cannabis products are not illegal and for some patients it may be suitable to use as part of a treatment plan prescribed by their health practitioner.

The QNMU believes access may be a barrier for patients in receiving medicinal cannabis products and we support approved medicinal cannabis products being accessible and affordable for evidence-based therapeutic purposes (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2019). Where safe to do so, barriers to accessing medicinal cannabis should be removed.

In our view, enabling access to medicinal cannabis products will ensure patients are under the guidance of a health practitioner and remove the need to obtain and use illicit cannabis.

The QNMU supports the continuation of clinical studies and trials of medicinal cannabis products. Further research must be undertaken on the efficacy and safety of medicinal cannabis products with data collection on the treatment, clinical outcomes and adverse events experienced by patients who have been prescribed medicinal cannabis to inform future guidance and use (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2019).

References

Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation. (2019). *Medicinal Cannabis – ANMF Position Statement*. Retrieved from http://anmf.org.au/documents/policies/PS_Medicinal_Cannabis.pdf

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Queensland Government. (2018). *Clinical guidance: for the use of medicinal cannabis products in Queensland*. Retrieved from https://www.health.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/634163/med-cannabis-clinical-guide.pdf