

Friday, 13 March 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO BOX 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: The Regulator of Medicinal Cannabis Bill 2014

Dear Delegates,

I am writing this submission for consideration to provide a perspective from a sufferer of Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and depression.

Anxiety and anxiety disorders comes in many different forms and GAD is a condition where a person is predisposed to a constant state of worry, stress and fear. Social Anxiety Disorder is a condition where a person has a fear of or experiences stress during social interactions, or when around other people.

I have lived with these conditions for as long as I can remember, however I can remember distinct changes in my personality occurring around the age of 10. I am 29 now and still have to manage my anxiety and depression through all the tools I have picked up on the way.

By the time I was 12 I started suffering depression and I recall praying to God to smite me and put me out of my misery and wishing my house would burn down with me in it. When I was 14 I first attempted and started acting out, trying to put myself into bad situations so that I would have an idea and an experience of what it felt like.

A few months after my first suicide attempt I was stopped at a train station by an older teenager who had asked if I was selling Cannabis. I have never had any experience with any kind of drug, including alcohol but was now interested in experiencing what I had been indoctrinated against. I told him I did not have any but wouldn't mind some, he later came across me and informed he had purchased some and offered to split half of the amount with me. I had just unwittingly made my first purchase of cannabis.

I searched online for information about using cannabis and felt I was ready to try it. From the moment I first burned and inhaled this plant, my mood lifted instantly, my mind was clear and appreciative of all that was around me, and I felt happy for the first time in years. The affects wore off about 2 hours later and I realised that I had experienced relief from stress for the first time. I used it a few more times before my parents caught me at 16 and I swore to them to stop.

Around age 22, I had just been made redundant from my job, moved back home and was unable to find another job for 4 more years. During this time my anxiety and depression worsened dramatically, suicidal ideation was constant, I slept for 16 hours of the day only eating one meal and I rarely left my bedroom. At 24 I first heard of the term anxiety disorder and could finally put a name to my affliction. I sought medical help and was put on a variety of SSRI anti-depressants.

Each type prescribed to me caused my anxiety and depression to lessen for a short period of time before worsening. The side effects progressively got worse as did my condition as my psychiatrist adjusted the dosages before giving up and trying the next brand. Finally we had stumbled upon one brand that did not worsen my condition but its only benefit was a limit on the height of my anxiety and depression. However, like other SSRI's, if I miss a dosage I experience withdrawals that cause shocks in my brain and severe fatigue. I still take the same medication but only because it is too painful to wean off.

When I was 25 I became friends with someone who smoked cannabis recreationally. Recalling my teenage years and wanting to feel some relief from my mental illnesses, I purchased some through him and tried it again. I started using it regularly and noticed the following ways it had treated my anxiety where the prescribed drugs had failed:

- My anxiety causes me to obsess over the same thoughts for days on end. I have difficulty falling asleep due to my overactive mind and these thoughts become week and month long concurrent obsessions that I am unable to stop thinking about.
 - Cannabis' effect on short term memory, causing forgetfulness while under the influence, provides me with a complete break from my obsessions. I may create new obsessions but they do not last long with regular cannabis use.
- Insomnia has always interrupted me from getting a full night's sleep, making me feel subpar the next day.
 - Cannabis generally provides a very well rested sleep making me feel fresh for the next day.
- My social anxiety has always made me feel like a need to escape from situations like school and work. I had been fired not too long before for not being talkative enough and the stress of work was often too overwhelming and debilitating.
 - The two hour break that Cannabis provides me before I go to bed is enough to make my stress more manageable throughout the rest of the day to perform at my best at work and lower my fear of social interactions.
- Even with prescribed medication, my depression, anxiety and thoughts of death and suicide were constant.
 - Since regularly using Cannabis, suicidal ideation has vanished and my depression and anxiety are mostly low.

Since starting regular use of Cannabis, I went from a suicidal shut-in dependant on my parents to having a full time job and promising career and an enthusiasm for the future.

Unfortunately, as it is still considered an illegal drug, I was arrested for possession of 28 grams (the amount I would use in about a fortnight) when I was pulled over for a license check while transporting it home from the point of purchase. Fortunately, the arresting police officers, the lawyer, the magistrate and the counsellor at the drug intervention session all understood my reasons for using Cannabis and did not treat me like a criminal, and I was spared a conviction. The arresting officer jokingly advised me to conceal it better in future.

In the black market in Australia, price and consistency in quality of Cannabis varies significantly and strains lacking in CBD are more prevalent. This prevents people using it for medicinal reasons from being able to find the ideal composition of THC and CBD that suits them and wasting money on strains that have no or undesired effects.

Last year I had spent 6 weeks with my friends in North America and was able to experience legal Cannabis due to recreational use laws in Colorado and medicinal use laws in Canada and California. The experience of being able to walk into an establishment, receiving advice from those who had researched the medicinal uses of different strains and purchasing high quality with documented cannabinoid concentrations that do not require as much to consume as that in Australia, is what I hope sufferers of chronic conditions can experience without having to leave the country.

I am grateful for the committee to consider my submission and commend your dutiful action on this issue. I look forward to hearing your decision.

Warmest Regards,