

How to Sell Cannabis Responsibly by Dr. Rosana Salvatera

Most are aware that as of October 17 the non-medical use of cannabis will be legal in Canada. While the federal government has set some standards and has established the overarching framework for cannabis legalization, the regulation of retail sales systems has been left to individual provinces. Last month, the Ontario Government announced plans for a mixed cannabis retail model that will include both an online provincial sales system to be launched immediately post-legalization and a private retail sales system anticipated to be launched by April, 2019.

The government is now consulting with municipalities and other stakeholders to inform the development of the regulated retail sales market to ensure the model remains safe while helping to eliminate the illegal market. Applying a commercial logic for cannabis sales is at odds with public health goals of preventing overconsumption and reducing harms. There are many lessons we can apply from both tobacco and alcohol sales to help ensure that the private market does not capitalize on the potential social and health harms associated with cannabis use.

A socially responsible and accountable cannabis retail system would set precautionary limits on the industry so that children and youth are adequately protected. How could that be achieved here in Peterborough? The following would be my top tips for getting it right:

1. Create a centralized licensing system for cannabis retail outlets that would restrict the number of licenses and associated storefronts based on population size. Establish rules for licensed businesses to restrict hours of operation, the types of products that can be sold alongside cannabis, and minimum training and education standards for staff. Evidence from the USA and abroad has shown that privatization leads to more outlets, longer hours of operation, increased promotions and increased sales and use. To protect and promote public health, restrictions should be placed on businesses to counteract these market forces.

2. Municipal governments should restrict the location and density of retail sales outlets through zoning mechanisms and First Nations governments should be supported to regulate private sales of cannabis according to their own protocols.

3. Protect youth by limiting the availability of high THC (the part of the plant that gets you “high”) products and set tax rates to reflect THC concentration levels. Invest in proactive public health promotion programs to support youth education and awareness about the risks associated with cannabis use, and safe use practices.

Youth are more likely to use products that have higher levels of THC and young people are particularly price sensitive because of lower average disposable income. Lessons learned elsewhere show that proactive health promotion and prevention strategies can effectively prevent cannabis use among youth. So let’s use them.

4. Local municipalities should avoid the opt-out option as having local retail sites may limit the presence of black-market products. I know this sounds counter-intuitive to some, but given how much illicit marketing currently exists, there is no reason to think it will just go away without any competition from the legal supply chain.

5. Finally, this is the time for the Province to enact proposed amendments to the Smoke-Free Ontario Act (including no vaping of any products in public places) and extend its scope to include cannabis for non-medical use. These provisions should serve as a minimum standard and allow local municipalities to develop additional smoking restrictions through by-laws as they see fit. Studies have shown that smoke-free policies can reduce smoking rates, youth initiation rates and increase quit attempts. Smoking bans have also been associated with improved health outcomes, such as reductions in heart disease and respiratory illness. Harmonizing public smoking policies to include non-medical cannabis would also make these policies more easily enforceable.

So those are my top five recommendations to the decision-makers as we prepare to usher in this new era of legalized cannabis. As an agency responsible to present evidence-informed information to our many partners and stakeholders, Peterborough Public Health hopes that we will be engaged in consultations so that together, we can make sure our communities get the best of both: health protection and access.



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