How We Talk about "Pot" Matters: Risk Messaging around Cannabis Legalization

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Current State of Cannabis Legalization

• Bill C-45, “the Cannabis Act” 2017
  – Legalizes production, distribution and possession of cannabis,

• What will be legal in July 2018?
  – Can possess 30 g dried marijuana or equivalent in other classes of cannabis
  – Can share up to 30 g of dried cannabis or equivalent with other adults.
  – However, only dried cannabis, cannabis oil, fresh cannabis, cannabis plants and seeds can be sold.

Photo credit: By H. Zell - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9421711
What about all the other products out there???

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>THC Content*</th>
<th>What is it?</th>
<th>Mode of Use</th>
<th>Legal in 2018?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cannabis oil</td>
<td>3-50%</td>
<td>Oil extraction</td>
<td>Ingested</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edibles</td>
<td>50-300 mg/item</td>
<td>Food, drink, candy</td>
<td>Ingested</td>
<td>Yes, made at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bubble Hash</td>
<td>20-60%</td>
<td>Ice water extraction of resin</td>
<td>Smoked or vaporized</td>
<td>Yes, made at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic solvent extracts (butane hash oil, shatter, etc)</td>
<td>60-90%</td>
<td>Solvent extraction with butane, isopropyl alcohol, propane, etc.</td>
<td>Smoked, vaporized, or dabbed</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-organic solvent extracts (shatter, wax, etc)</td>
<td>60-90%</td>
<td>Extraction with supercritical CO₂</td>
<td>Smoked, vaporized, or dabbed</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosin/Wax</td>
<td>50-70%</td>
<td>Concentrate created using heat and pressure</td>
<td>Smoked or dabbed</td>
<td>Yes, made at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinctures</td>
<td>mg/bottle</td>
<td>Alcoholic extract; droppers</td>
<td>Sub-lingual</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topicals</td>
<td>mg/bottle</td>
<td>Infused lip balm, lotions, personal lubricants</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on review of products available on several Canadian online cannabis retail sites.*
Cannabis Risk Messaging Challenges

• How do we craft health communications that:
  – Adequately inform the user of risks to self and others?
  – Reduce harms to those who choose to use?
  – Do not rely on stereotypes, fear, or stigma?

• Return to risk communication basics...
  – “Be first, be right, be credible”
  – Simple, plain, appropriate language
  – Target audiences for information/education
Risk messaging: What should we be talking about... and how?

I. Getting the terminology right
II. Understand the limits of evidence and use wisely.
III. Neither stigmatization nor normalization
IV. Limit or reduce harm for new and established users
V. Ensure that all users understand legal responsibilities and new criminal offenses.
VI. Ensure home growers know how to safely grow, process, store, and dispose of their cannabis.
I. Getting the Terminology Right

- *Smoking* of cannabis was widely introduced in the USA by immigrants from Mexico & South America 20\textsuperscript{th} c.
- Aggressive US Government campaign to stigmatize cannabis by **fanning fear of Mexican immigrants**
  - Deliberate shift from “cannabis” to “marihuana” (unusual/foreign/dangerous).
  - Promoted stories about Mexican immigrants, people of colour, and “innocent” citizens under the influence engaging in crime, sexual violence, criminal insanity, etc.
  - An ugly but powerful tool of prohibition
I. Getting the Terminology Right

• Genus name: *Cannabis*

• Using **formal terms** emphasizes the regulatory aspect rather than a user-based or promotional aspect

*Photo credit; Walther Otto Müller [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons*
I. Getting the Terminology Right

• Some terms **undermine** the goals of public health.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionable Terms</th>
<th>Better Alternatives?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weed, grass, pot, etc.</td>
<td>Vs. Cannabis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoke</td>
<td>Vs. Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>Vs. Non-medical, adult-use, commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (sounds fun!)</td>
<td>Vs. Impaired (sounds like jail!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispensary (medical, beneficial)</td>
<td>Vs. Retail outlet (commercial, for profit)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Promotion/advertising of cannabis is/will be strictly regulated. Don’t do the work of industry for them!
II. Understanding the Limits of Evidence

• Our knowledge of cannabis risks is incomplete:
  – Legalization will greatly facilitate research

• Credibility: Public health still accused of “reefer hysteria.”

• Stick to what we clearly know:
  – Inhaling particulates and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) is bad, regardless of what you are smoking!
  – Careless use and storage can lead to child/pet poisoning.
  – Driving while impaired is dangerous.
When you need to present health effects info:

- From the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM, 2017)
- **Strength of evidence approach:** rates health evidence as insufficient, limited, moderate, substantial, or conclusive.
- Allows us to present health information *in context* – avoid reefer hysteria!
- On the NCCEH Cannabis Page
III. Neither stigmatization nor normalization

- Prohibition and Commercialization bring the same ills.
- Chief MHOs and UPHN (2016): we neither want to drive use underground, nor normalize/promote substance use.

Figure 1: “The Paradox of Prohibition” - adapted from Marks
IV. Limit/reduce harm for new/established users

- New users:
  - Education regarding the diversity and potencies of products available (legally or not), including edibles.
  - Make low-potency products available

- Established users:
  - Try to improve habits;
    - E.g., using filtered devices for smoked cannabis greatly reduces pesticide residues passed in the smoke stream (Sullivan et al. 2013, J Toxicol)
  - Use other forms (e.g., edibles, vapes)?
    - Legalization and research **required** to make risk-informed recommendations.
IV. Limit/reduce harm for new/established users

- For ALL users: easy access to information or treatment in case of problems
  - Advice on using/storing products in the home.
    - Children and pets, but also other adults!
  - Promote the use of poison control centres for accidental poisonings or other adverse events.
    - Put local PCC number on every label!
    - Serves dual function of connecting patients to treatment AND collecting surveillance data.
  - How to find treatment/tools for cannabis use disorder
IV. Limit/reduce harm for users

• Canada’s Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines

• Recommendations to incorporate into messaging that will (hopefully) result in fewer adverse effects for users.

• NCCEH Cannabis Page

V. Ensure that users understand legal responsibilities

- Two objectives of legalization:
  - Avoid *criminalizing* cannabis users, including youth.
  - Cut off funding to organized crime.

- However, it’s not the *Wild West* either...
  - Public must be educated regarding new responsibilities and new criminal offenses related to legalization.
An example....

• Colorado’s “Good to Know” program
• Includes
  – Laws & penalties
  – Safe use
  – Tips for tourists
  – Health effects
  – Youth prevention

• Slick, simple, easy to use and understand!
• Great slogan: non-judgmental.

www.goodtoknowcolorado.com
VI. Ensure home growers know how to safely grow, process, store, and dispose of their cannabis.

• Many home growers will be first timers, and may not have access to good advice

• Personal cultivation entails a number of EH risks:
  – In appropriate use of pesticides; humidity control and mould; disposal of mouldy plants; safely installing equipment; use of solvents to make concentrates

• Upcoming NCCEH webinar on Cannabis Legalization and Environmental Health (January 2018).
In summary

• Cannabis will be legal to use in Canada next year

• Getting cannabis messaging right requires:
  – Observing those risk communication principles
  – Choosing our terminology with care
  – Presenting health risks credibly and with context
    • Between “Reefer Madness” and “Dazed and Confused”
  – Promoting lower-risk use wherever possible.
THANK YOU!

For more information, please visit the NCCEH Cannabis Topic Page, or reach out!

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