

## LETTERS

### Cannabis prohibition harms Canada's youth

The federal government is legally regulating cannabis, in part because of concerns over the health risks associated with its use, not despite them.<sup>1</sup>

After almost a century of criminal prohibition, Canadian teens consume the most cannabis in the industrialized world,<sup>2</sup> they report that cannabis is easier to obtain than alcohol, they are about twice as likely to try cannabis than try tobacco, and their average age of initiation is 14.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Kelsall, in the editorial titled “Cannabis legislation fails to protect Canada's youth,” endorsed the Canadian Medical Association's position that the minimum age be higher for legal purchase of cannabis than that proposed in the government's recent bill.<sup>4</sup> The minimum age will not delineate who can obtain cannabis and who cannot, but rather who can access the legally regulated market and who will continue to buy cannabis from criminals who sell myriad drugs of unknown provenance, potency and purity, on commission, tax free, to anyone of any age, anytime, anywhere, no questions asked.

The federal government has articulated two primary objectives for legally regulating cannabis: to restrict access for

minors and to displace the black market. Setting the minimum age too high would run counter to both primary objectives. The government has also acknowledged the harm that criminal sanctions cause to young people.

The courts have granted authorized patients the right to self-sufficient cannabis cultivation.<sup>5</sup> Allowing “recreational” consumers to grow their own will reduce the “street value” of cannabis and further the objective of taking profits away from organized crime.

With respect to road safety, cannabis usage rates rise and fall with no statistical relationship to cannabis laws and their enforcement.<sup>6</sup> However, cannabis is an economic substitute for alcohol, with cross-price elasticities.<sup>7</sup> When cannabis use goes up, drinking and impaired driving accidents go down. Indeed, setting the minimum age for cannabis higher than the minimum age for alcohol could encourage young people to drink.

We are not arguing over whether or not cannabis should exist, but rather debating what might be the optimal — not utopian — regulatory model for minimizing the costs and maximizing the benefits of cannabis in society. The *Cannabis Act* will not be perfect, but it will be a substantial improvement over criminal prohibition. Federal and provincial regu-

lations can be refined as we learn the pros and cons.

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**Competing interests:** Matthew Elrod is a director of DrugSense, which has a mission to end drug prohibition.