

To the Select Committee into Cannabis and Hemp
Re: Inquiry Into Cannabis and Hemp

My name is James Debowski. I'm a 32 year old male who recently completed a PhD at the Australian National University. I live in Perth with my wife.

In August of 2020, my wife and I were involved in a major vehicle accident. Under medical guidance I've been using a cannabis product to treat lingering symptoms from this accident. I'm writing to share my story with the committee in the hope that it may help inform better policy regarding the regulation and accessibility of medicinal cannabis products.

On August 15th, 2020, my wife and I were driving up to Broome with two of our dearest friends. Early in the morning, our vehicle came off the road somewhere just south of Cue. Our vehicle rolled twice before grinding to a halt upside down, facing back the way we had come. The driver and I were both catastrophically injured. We were taken to Cue nursing post before being airlifted by the Royal Flying Doctor Service to Royal Perth Hospital. Due to her injuries, our close friend and the driver of the vehicle died shortly after arriving at Royal Perth.

The doctors found that I'd broken some 20 odd bones across my back, neck, ribs, face and skull. I'd suffered a major concussion and severe bruising to my heart. Luckily, my spinal cord remained intact. I underwent immediate surgery, fusing nearly all of my thoracic vertebrae into a single unit. I spent the next three months in a neck brace, learning to move in and use a very different body.

The accident changed my life. Even today, I am riddled with chronic pain. This ranges from nerve pain that comes and goes - like hot rocks under my skin - to a general soreness and stiffness that follows me day and night. I've struggled also with severe cognitive and psychological impairment. The jury is still out on whether I have PTSD or a brain injury resulting from the crash. For the first year, I often found myself crying on the floor of my office, or the shower, or in my bed hiding from the world at all hours of the day. Maintaining a normal life was near impossible through the stress and deep mental fog I was experiencing.

At about the 1-year mark, I began using a broad-spectrum cannabis product: a cannabidiol or CBD extract. I had tried other pain medications in the past, but none of these had been appropriate. They often left me emotionally numb and mentally dull. I was interested in CBD primarily to deal with my pain, but I was optimistic that it might also help my mental state. I was already aware that CBD products were significantly cheaper and more accessible online than they were through prescribing specialists in Australia. Rather than approaching my GP I purchased the product online to first test if it was right for me. I noticed good results early on. The CBD drastically reduced my pain and, for the first time in months, I experienced emotions other than an overwhelming sense of fear. I began to live a normal life again.

I approached my GP for a referral to a Perth based clinic specializing in medicinal cannabis. The specialist recommended that I begin taking CBD Isolate – a product with no THC present. Since taking this product I've benefited greatly from reduced pain and inflammation, better sleep, and reduced anxiety. I take CBD throughout the day as a way of preventing pain and responding to it when it occurs.

For me, CBD has proven far more effective than over the counter pain medications and far more suited to me than other prescription products that I've tried. For the past two months or so I've combined CBD with Duloxetine, a recently developed antidepressant that also targets pain. Together, these drugs have transformed my quality of life. I cannot advocate strongly enough for the medical benefits and value of medicinal cannabis.

To be very clear, there are still major challenges and issues with the way that cannabis products are regulated, prescribed and charged for. I mentioned that I take a CBD Isolate product. This is a product that contains literally no THC. For many people, products with THC promise greater quality of life benefits including pain, stress and anxiety management. Through experimentation, I know that I am certainly one of them. However current laws and roadside testing practices make these products – at least legally - inaccessible for people like myself.

Currently, West Australian laws and drug-testing practices are set up in a way that punishes marijuana users regardless of whether their driving is impaired or not. If somebody tests positive for THC, even if they are deemed to not be impaired, they receive 3 demerits and \$1250 in fines. A subsequent offence constitutes a 6 month driving suspension and up to \$2000 in fines. The problem is that roadside drug tests detect trace amounts of THC in saliva, which can be far below the amount where one is actually impaired. It's the same for a lot of 'on-the-job' testing. For the sake of driving or working, many medicinal cannabis products contain a negligible amount of THC – not enough to impair someone, but still enough to be detected by the most common tests. These laws conflate puritanical drug-policy with road safety measures. They offer little public benefit while standing in the way of people like me getting access to medical products that can improve our quality of life. I'm certainly not advocating for people being stoned behind the wheel or on the job, but there's a massive difference between the medicinal use of cannabis products, and the type of use that causes impairment. Our drug policies and testing practices need to reflect this.

Cost is another obvious factor affecting all medical marijuana products. The cost of my initial visit with a specialist was \$268.50 after the Medicare rebate. I'm then required to attend monthly follow-ups, which cost \$50 each after the Medicare rebate. A moderate monthly dosage of CBD isolate is a further \$380. These costs are simply excessive. Part of the challenge is that there are still relatively few prescribing specialists and many seem to charge handsomely for the service. Another challenge, of course, is the cost of cannabis products themselves. I understand that this is beyond the scope of this committee; however it's worth noting that expanding the range of cannabis products on the

Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme should be a high priority for the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

I'd like to thank the committee for this opportunity to share my story and the value that I've derived from medicinal cannabis. I'd like to stress that there is still a long way to go towards creating accessible pathways to medicinal cannabis for those like myself. I wish you all the best of luck in addressing these challenges.

Warmest regards,

James Debowski