Regulate medicinal marijuana, doctors urge

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Health Editor

The only way to protect people from questionable black-market marijuana is to regulate the supply of medicinal forms of the drug that can be prescribed to suitable people, doctors say.

The president of the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation, Dr Alex Wodak, said given that it was impossible for people to know what they were getting when they bought cannabis on the black market, the only solution was for the government to create a controlled “white market”.

“A safe source of medicines is really one of the fundamental tools of public health, along with a safe water supply, a safe food supply, and safe air to breathe,” he said.

“Medicinal cannabis should be regulated by the regulators, just like penicillin and insulin are.”

While governments could choose not to prosecute people for possessing and using black-market cannabis for medicinal purposes, Dr Wodak said this would not do anything to protect people from snake-oil salesmen or forms of the drug that are unsuitable for them.

The addiction medicine specialist said the best way for governments to provide safe access was for the Health Department to contract a company to produce high-grade botanical cannabis that is protected from contaminants. It could then be packaged like other medicines and prescribed to people for inhalation through a vaporiser.

“The least worst way of taking leaf cannabis is by heating it to sub-combustible temperatures – that is, below the temperature at which the leaf burns – and inhaling the vapour, not the smoke. We have technology that allows that to happen,” he said.

Dr Wodak said this would allow people to inhale a sufficient dose to reduce their symptoms to a tolerable level without getting unwanted side effects.

Dr David Allsop, a research fellow in psychopharmacology and addiction medicine at the University of Sydney, said governments should take control of cannabis production.

He said there was enough scientific evidence to show that it was a useful treatment for people with rheumatoid arthritis, cancer and pain that stems from injuries to the nervous system.

“There are clinical studies showing it is beneficial to people with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. It alleviates nightmares, sleeplessness and recurrent flashbacks of traumatic events,” Dr Allsop said.

While three pharmaceutical cannabis products have been developed, only one of them – Sativex – has been approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in Australia to treat multiple sclerosis. Some Australian cancer patients are also part of a global trial of Sativex to see if it relieves cancer pain, and it is being tested overseas on people with epilepsy.