

**Submission
No 14**

**INQUIRY INTO LAW REFORM ISSUES REGARDING
SYNTHETIC DRUGS**

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Inquiry into Law Reform Issues Regarding Synthetic Drugs

From Maureen Steele

1. Introduction

I am a health Education Officer and have been working in the drug and alcohol field since 1992. I have assisted a number of cannabis users stop or moderate their use.

2. Prohibition doesn't work

I will not rehash all the arguments as to the failure of drug prohibition laws. This issue has been covered widely in the press in recent days with the release of the Australia 21 report, "The Prohibition of illicit Drugs is Killing and Criminalizing our Children." Politicians such as Bob Carr have come to the conclusion that drug prohibition is creating more harm than good. World leaders including Guatemalan president, Otto Perez Molina, former Mexican President Vicente Fox, Koffi Anan, Richard Branson all support the call for drug law reform. Australia was once at the forefront of drug issues, being one of the first countries to introduce the immensely successful Needle & Syringe program. Prohibition of drugs, including synthetic cannabinoids is dangerous and retrograde. Australian governments ought to be courageous enough to take up the call to change the current drug laws for the good of society.

3. It will be difficult to legislate against all compounds and chemicals, and more dangerous compounds will become available

The TGA has recently added 8 classes of synthetic cannabinoids as Schedule 9 drugs. The hope is that this move will cover all variations of synthetic cannabis. The reality is that backyard chemists will synthesise more dangerous compounds that will be made available. This has happened with steroids and amphetamines with more dangerous compounds entering the market. The law will always be one step behind illicit chemists and organized crime.

4. Banning substances that "mimic" cannabis

The TGA have also introduced a new class of schedule 9 drugs i.e. those that "mimic cannabis" regardless of their chemical composition. This is a very slippery legal slope. The effects of cannabis are wide ranging and subjective and vary from feelings of relaxation and sedation to feelings of anxiety and paranoia. Some users of cannabis and cannabinoids feel NO effect. Some experience a mild, euphoric effect comparable to eating a bar of chocolate.

Some users feel more energetic and compare the sensation to having a Vitamin B shot. Does this mean that chocolate and Vitamin B shots will be included under this legislation as they “mimic” the effects of cannabis/cannabinoids?

The lack of evidence of the damage or threat to public health/safety makes banning synthetic cannabinoids illogical. If governments start to ban substances that have the POTENTIAL to create harm (as with Salvia divinorum) then the possibilities are endless. I once had a client who injected vegemite. An obviously harmful practice. Therefore, should vegemite be banned due to its potential to cause harm?

Put simply, how can you prohibit something when you don't know its risk? There is a lack of peer reviewed literature regarding the toxicology or benefits of synthetic cannabinoids. This research needs to occur before any legislation is put into place.

5. Legalise cannabis

A further obvious strategy to further research is to legalise cannabis. Tobacco is legal and half of its users die from its effects. This can not be said of cannabis/cannabinoids. Legalising will make cannabis/cannabanoids safer for consumers, it will destroy the black market, and it will provide a further revenue stream for government.