

**Submission
No 342**

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE REGULATORY
FRAMEWORK FOR CANNABIS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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NSW Cannabis Legalisation Bill 2023 - Individual public submission by New South Wales resident and retired veteran, Mr Derek Pyrah.

29th July 2024

My name is Derek Pyrah, I am a New South Wales resident and disabled military veteran. I am writing this public and individual submission to the NSW Parliament in support of the NSW Cannabis Legalisation Bill 2023. I will be sharing my lived experiences as a veteran in accessing prescription medicinal cannabis to treat my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), condition following my deployments to Iraq.

I joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), in 1990 as an Aircraft AirFrame Fitter when I was 15 years old, later training as a communications specialist and serving in Iraq in 2003. I came home from Iraq with PTSD symptoms and was medically discharged from the RAAF in December 2004.

In 2006 I was first prescribed psychiatric medications to treat my PTSD condition. For the past 18 years my PTSD condition has been managed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), and I was supplied with large daily doses of polypharmacy psychiatric medications and regular hospitalisation. My daily medications included large doses of antidepressants, antipsychotics, anticonvulsants, mood stabilisers, benzodiazepines and Z-drugs.

On these medications I became withdrawn, emotionless, started getting suicidal thoughts (when I had never had these before in my life), gained almost 40kg in weight, my body started shutting down, and I was unable to communicate with my wife who became my full time carer while trying to raise our 2 small children. I felt like an overweight medicated zombie with suicidal ideations. My story was included in the media and Channel 10 "The Project". [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

In 2015, my marriage ended, leaving me homeless and desperate for a way to get better. After watching a documentary about U.S. veterans finding relief from PTSD symptoms with medicinal cannabis [\[3\]](#), I decided to try street cannabis. To my surprise, it immediately alleviated my crippling anxiety and depressive symptoms more effectively than any of the 20+ medications I had tried over the previous 11 years.

After 13 years of pharmaceutical based PTSD treatment my treating psychologist and psychiatrist saw that my PTSD condition was finally starting to stabilise through the use of cannabis, they encouraged me to continue using cannabis because my PTSD condition was finally starting to stabilise. Over the next few years and under the guidance of my treating doctors I slowly decreased the dosage and quantity of my pharmaceutical based psychiatric medications while continuing to use cannabis medicinally.

In December 2019 it was clear to my treating doctors that 13 years of pharmaceutical psychiatric medications were not working for me and that medicinal cannabis was allowing me to finally stabilise and begin the long journey to recovery. Due to my military injuries I could not work, I was financially reliant on DVA and I could not afford legal medicinal cannabis on my DVA pension. My doctors applied to the DVA for subsidised medicinal cannabis to treat my PTSD condition.

In December 2019 the DVA stopped approving veterans applications for prescription medicinal cannabis to treat their PTSD and TBI conditions. Despite presenting DVA with overwhelming supporting evidence, all four of my applications for medicinal cannabis were rejected with DVA citing “a lack of evidence to support using medicinal cannabis for PTSD & TBI” as a reason for every rejection. The DVA went on to also state “*the Department has been advised it is safer to keep PTSD & TBI veterans on the current polypharmacy psychiatric medication regimen rather than using prescribed medicinal cannabis medications.*”

The following year in September 2020 I was found by police with my illegal cannabis medication. I was facing court and a maximum sentence of 10 years prison. I contacted Lucy Haslam from United in Compassion for help. Lucy organised a lawyer and compassionate use of prescription medicinal cannabis oil before the court date. Thankfully the magistrate understood the situation and dismissed all charges. [\[4\]](#)

In April 2022 Lucy Haslam helped me start the No More Zombie Veterans online signature campaign. This public awareness campaign has over 33,000 signatures from Australians who support our veterans using medicinal cannabis and demand that the DVA reapprove the use of medicinal cannabis to treat veterans suffering with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). [\[5\]](#)

In 2022 I made my public submission to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide [\[6\]](#) which detailed:

- the problems and dangers veterans face from the long term over prescription of psychiatric medications to treat their PTSD & TBI symptoms;
- evidence and studies supporting the use of medicinal cannabis to treat PTSD & TBI symptoms;
- veterans facing court and criminal convictions for trying to recover from their injuries;
- my journey in fighting for the DVA to reapprove the use of medicinal cannabis for myself and for veterans with PTSD & TBI, including evidence of the DVA telling veterans to lie about their health conditions in order to receive DVA subsidised medicinal cannabis treatments.

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide has found that **at least 3 veterans are suiciding every fortnight** [\[7\]](#), with estimates indicating up to 30% of our veterans suffering with mental illnesses as a result of their service to our country.

One of the most commonly noted side effects with pharmaceutical based psychiatric medications used to treat PTSD & TBI veterans, is a **warning of an increased risk of suicide**. Scientific studies show evidence of the dangers when taking large doses of multiple psychiatric medications for years and decades. [\[8\]](#)

DVA research shows that at least 80% of veterans with PTSD are treated with psychotropic polypharmacy (2 or more medications for the same condition), and warns “*research shows psychotropic polypharmacy can contribute to falls, hospital admissions, morbidity, and mortality.*” [\[9\]](#)

The Endocannabinoid system (ECS), is the human body’s microscopic signaling system which maintains balance and homeostasis, and promotes health in the human body. [\[10\]](#) Scientific studies show how medicinal cannabis medications work with our bodies ECS to erase traumatic memories, aid in sleep, reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms common with PTSD & TBI. [\[11\]](#)

Data presented to the DVA by this campaign show that 89% of veterans who are using medicinal cannabis are reducing the use of their polypharmacy psychiatric medications.

A cost comparison shows the average cost for my ineffective psychiatric medication and hospitalisation regimen was more than \$12,000 per month (while my health and condition continued to decline), while the average cost for my safer and more effective medicinal cannabis medication is around \$1,000 per month (and my condition is continuing to stabilise and I am feeling healthy again).

Data from the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), show the majority of prescriptions for medicinal cannabis are to treat chronic pain, anxiety, sleep disorders and PTSD. [\[12\]](#) Legally prescribed medicinal cannabis is an approved medication for all Australians with PTSD & TBI, except disabled veterans under the care of the DVA. DVAs decision to not approve the use of medicinal cannabis to treat PTSD & TBI, is financially forcing a disabled and vulnerable subset of our community to remain on a medication regimen that empirical evidence shows is causing them severe levels of harm, distress and death, and is contributing to multiple family and relationship breakups. Australian veterans report feeling that the DVA actions go against the 1992 Disability Discrimination Act and are a potential human rights issue.

Around Australia there is a lack of education, resources and support for veterans and first responders regarding the ECS, how to use prescription medicinal cannabis medications, and the legalities of using this medication in public and the workplace. From what we have witnessed firsthand in the veteran and first responder communities, this lack of education is giving medicinal cannabis patients unwanted temporary adverse effects.

The No More Zombie Veterans campaign believes that education and support for medicinal cannabis patients is crucial and is requesting better education for policy makers and patients on the endocannabinoid system. This campaign is also working towards a state based education and support package for veterans and first responders who are prescribed life changing medicinal cannabis medications.

Thank you for reading my submission, with your help we can give a better quality of life to our veterans and first responders.

Kindest regards,

Derek Pyrah

#NoMoreZombieVeterans

www.change.org/nomorezombieveterans

www.nomorezombieveterans.com

Attachments:

- 1). News article; "**War turned my loving husband into a stranger**"
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e_h3QhbAeFYcnxrCyi9-sNJ4f1JNsgyU/view?usp=sharing
- 2). Channel 10, The Project interview "**Derek's story**" <https://youtu.be/uGbhEN-S5yA>
- 3). Weediquette S01E02 "Stoned Vets" <https://youtu.be/3CK7cdNZb5Q?si=xWXHFhIR8rVHxzYk>
- 4). Derek Pyrah court evidence presented to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide
<https://defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/anon-z1e7-qqx3-m>
- 5). www.change.org/nomorezombieveterans
- 6). Derek Pyrah 2022 public Royal Commission submission
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yQ5FeKaKavgiDT4eMGWLWU_ZSOvLLrID/view?usp=sharing
- 7). Royal Commission reveals at least 3 veteran suicides per fortnight
<https://defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au/news-and-media/media-releases/royal-commission-analysis-reveals-three-deaths-suicide-every-fortnight>
- 8). Adverse effects of psychiatric medications used for the management of PTSD and TBI.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EQxRCwEr9W-Z8KBRrBx1SID4T1t-dQhf/view?usp=drive_link
- 9). DVA Newsroom - "Veterans with PTSD who take multiple medications could be at risk of adverse health effects."
<https://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/latest-news-veterans/veterans-ptsd-who-take-multiple-medications-could-be-risk-adverse>
- 10). Endocannabinoid System information from the National Institutes of Health, National Library of Medicine and National Center for Biotechnology Information.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/18XiJYYdugu8Qgv-x6alSSzly4oo_2QRL/view?usp=sharing
- 11). Studies showing evidence of how medicinal cannabis manages PTSD and TBI.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ulwzA60GVfFARNA_oSzawM_73ALMwg_b/view?usp=drive_link
- 12). TGA data on medicinal cannabis prescriptions
<https://www.tga.gov.au/products/unapproved-therapeutic-goods/medicinal-cannabis-hub/medicinal-cannabis-access-pathways-and-usage-data/medicinal-cannabis-special-access-scheme-data>