



GLOBAL DRUG SURVEY

GDS2019: Cannabis health information – will it make any difference?

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Congratulations to Canada. The first country to mandate that cannabis products sold in legally regulated outlets must carry not only information on THC and CBD composition but also advice about potential harms and how to minimise them. They have gone for a set of messages that offer a combination of ‘don’t do this’ (e.g. don’t drive stoned) and fact-based messages (e.g. about the harmful contents of cannabis smoke, the risk of dependence and vulnerability of younger brains to cannabis).

As such, *they take a leaf out* of some of the work being done by GDS and others on improved health messages on alcohol labels. The big difference of course, is that while the alcohol industry vehemently opposes raising people’s awareness of the harms related to alcohol use, the newly regulated cannabis industry in Canada has no choice. Well done, Canada, and what a shame that US states that have regulated cannabis to date did not institute such requirements.

Some of GDS’s key objectives are to promote honest conversations about drug use, to educate individuals who decide to use drugs about safer use, and to encourage informed reviews of current drug policies. Within the context of an illicit market, the only health messages consistent with government policy is zero tolerance – simply stating drugs are bad. That’s why a regulated market is a game changer. It allows governments to support health messages that are honest and treat people as adults who are interested in their own health and well-being.

This includes the acknowledgement that the regular use of any regulated psychoactive substance carries risks primarily related to routes of use (e.g. smoking), intoxication-related behaviours (e.g. driving) and dependence. If we can use health information on packaging as a way to ensure that people who use these substances are informed about the risks related to use, this can only be a good thing.

But will such evidence-based health information be taken seriously and, most importantly, will it make any difference? Honestly, this is hard to predict. But at the very least, it will be a huge improvement on scaremongering health promotion campaigns churned out by daft advertising agencies at the request of ideologically, evidence resistant government departments. These messages have not only failed to offer any useful information to people who use drugs but also tended to portray them as losers. Not a great way to engage people, others than those who have already decided that using drugs is a mortal sin.

So, this year, GDS2019 will conduct the first ever evaluation of cannabis labels containing information about health and side effects related to the use of THC-containing cannabis. We have adapted 3 health messages developed by the Canadian Government and added 2 messages on side effects based on the most common reasons to quit that we found last year in GDS2018 (effects on memory and motivation). Our research last year on alcohol labels with health information, identified huge gaps in people's awareness of many alcohol-related health risks and wide variations between countries.

This year's focus on cannabis labelling is crucial to ensure that approaches to regulation and public health policy are based on evidence not ideology. People who like using cannabis need to be informed and engaged.

So, if you have used cannabis in the last year, we'd love to hear your thoughts on the messages that matter most to you. Please take part in the world's largest drug survey now:

www.globaldrugsurvey.com/GDS2019