

November 26th 2021

Letter of support for Toronto Public Health submission to Health Canada

As an acute care physician and director of substance use services I write this letter of support for Toronto public health's decision to submit a drug possession decriminalization exemption to Health Canada.

In the context of our current public health crisis of unprecedented overdose deaths implementation of decriminalization should be seen as having minimal risk, significant support within the medical community and potential to save young lives.

Regularly I meet clients in hospital who are hesitant to disclose substance use. They fear that if they acknowledge illicit drug use they will somehow be punished or the police will become involved. People who use drugs have early discharge (against medical advice) from hospital at rates that are significantly higher than the general population. Leaving hospital with untreated conditions increases the risk of complications and death. This lack of trust has significant and damaging effects; it can result in a failure to appropriately treat and support these individuals.

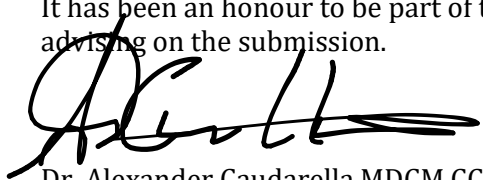
Decriminalization is required for people to feel comfortable sharing, discussing and seeking help for their use of illicit drugs when they are admitted to institutions such as hospitals.

Furthermore, I have heard again and again from my patients that fear of criminalization has caused delays in seeking out treatment for their substance use issues or hesitancy to call emergency services when they witness an overdose.

It is true that in past years, Toronto police service and crown attorneys have been less likely to place or pursue charges for simple possession. However, as it remains an illegal act, I have seen repeatedly as a physician that the fear my patients have has not reduced.

Toronto public health's initial submission takes into account not only the immediate benefit decriminalization could have but also offers a multitude of appropriate and robust alternatives to policing for simple drug possession. This broad and well consulted plan can help drastically improve the lives and well-being of people who use drugs.

It has been an honour to be part of this process as a member of the working group developing and advising on the submission.



Dr. Alexander Caudarella MDCM CCFP ABAM (d)
Alexander.caudarella@mail.uToronto.ca
778 872 3486