

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

**QUESTION 402-18(3):
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IMPACTS OF CANNABIS LEGALIZATION
October 17, 2018**

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. Recreational use of cannabis is not addictive in the sense that heroin is addictive, but it can create dependency behaviours that can be every bit as disruptive and unhealthy as alcohol, tobacco, or other substances. Is it the intention of our professional health services to adjust the way we scan the general population health, offer diagnostic services, promote and offer addiction treatment services, or make other adjustments concurrent upon the legalization of recreational cannabis use? Mahsi.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we have been reaching out, as you heard in my statement earlier today, to professionals and people who have the knowledge that we need to incorporate it into our system here in the Northwest Territories. We are open and willing to learn when it comes to medical marijuana and the impacts it has on residents, but I think one of the important things is now we actually have the opportunity to have that frank dialogue and discussion with our residents in the Northwest Territories that not everybody had been prepared to have when it was illegal. Our staff are getting up to speed. They are getting to understand the implications of consuming cannabis on the body, on the mind, and we are prepared to evolve our system to meet those new realities.

MS. GREEN: With legalization, the message for youth is surely that pot has moved into the realm of being a little more okay than it was yesterday. A watching file on the proliferation of cannabis use among youth will be critical.

How does the Minister plan to ensure these new professionals have their pot antennae up and are listening?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Once again, I will go back to the opportunity for frank dialogue. Up until now, the conversation has been, "Marijuana is illegal. You shouldn't be using it." Now, the conversation is, "Cannabis is legal, but we know it has profound impact on the development of young people's minds and brains, as well as pregnant mothers, youth, and all of those different at-risk categories." We can now have informed discussions with those residents to help them understand those implications and those ramifications of utilizing the product.

The health practitioners. As a system, we have been reaching out to experts who can help us get informed, help us speak the right language when it comes to encouraging people not to use, especially at-risk populations. I think we have the opportunity now to have those important discussions that we haven't necessarily had because traditionally the conversations have been around, "It's illegal. You shouldn't consume."

MS. GREEN: Thanks to the Minister for that answer. I realize that there isn't a lot of information because this substance was not legal, but now that it is, how does the Minister intend to track and report on the possibility of increased demand for dependency treatment services in the event of an increase in demand for pot itself?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Now that we have moved to a single system, and you are getting really tired of hearing that, I'm sure, we have the ability to actually do things in a different way. Whereas all authorities would have been tracking information in their own unique ways, we have an opportunity to ensure that we are collecting data in a simple and consistent way across the authorities. We are doing that work now. We know that cannabis is now legal. It is an opportunity for us to start incorporating that in. We haven't got the specifics in place, obviously, but it is certainly a conversation that has occurred and we are looking for a way to make that happen.

In the meantime, we will be reaching out to clients who are expressing concerns. We have electronic medical records that we can use to help collect data, so that we can have better information for evidence-based decision-making in the future.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's reassuring to hear that the Minister and his officials are prepared to collect information in this area. As my colleague from Mackenzie Delta said, preparedness doesn't end today. So can the Minister tell us how his health promotion and marketing efforts will be tailored to promote public health over the coming months and years? Thank you.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Contrary to what some Members have indicated, this is something we have been working on for quite some time. We have been working on this since 2016, trying to develop messaging and making sure that we are ready to get the information out there on the impacts of cannabis on the developing brain as well as other health risks.

Our community healthy living fairs are an important tool that we utilize to get into every community to get that information out to our residents. Those community living fairs are going to continue, as will this information continue to be included in those fairs.

We also know that there are lots of professionals out there, like professionals we have already brought up, who could help share information in a meaningful way with residents. We want to keep doing those types of things.

On top of that, the Members have heard me say it before that we have reached out to the federal government seeking some funding to help us tailor some community-specific messaging. I am optimistic that we are going to be able to make a positive announcement on that funding in the next month or two. We have been working closely with the federal government and making progress in that area. Once we make that progress, once that is finalized, we will be able to move forward and do more concrete, community-focused communications around the use of cannabis throughout the Northwest Territories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.