



NEW SOUTH WALES NURSES AND MIDWIVES' ASSOCIATION
AUSTRALIAN NURSING AND MIDWIFERY FEDERATION NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH



POSITION STATEMENT ON MEDICINAL CANNABIS

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NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association
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Position Statement on Medicinal Cannabis

Cannabis is classified as a cannabinoid drug. Cannabis can be used recreationally as well as medicinally, for therapeutic purposes, to treat disease or alleviate symptoms.¹ The cannabis plant – *Cannabis Sativa* – contains over 100 cannabinoids, most of which are not well understood. The most researched cannabinoids – and those with the most well-known therapeutic effects – are delta tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).²

The term 'medicinal cannabis' describes a range of cannabis preparations intended for therapeutic use such as oil, tinctures and other extracts, untreated cannabis, cannabis resin, and synthetic cannabinoids³.

Governments at both Commonwealth, State and Territory levels have implemented legislative and policy changes to allow the cultivation, manufacturing, prescribing and dispensing of medicinal cannabis products for patients in Australia⁴.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) administers the *Therapeutic Goods Act 1989* (the Act), which establishes the regulatory framework for all medicines in Australia⁵. Medicinal cannabis is an 'unapproved therapeutic good' as of 2022.

No medicinal cannabis products are listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), meaning access can be prohibitively expensive for many patients. The Act provides different mechanisms to allow access to unapproved therapeutic goods. For medicinal cannabis products these include:

- Authorised prescriber Scheme (AP)
- Special access scheme (SAS)
- Clinical trials⁶

There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of medicinal cannabis use in the treatment of medical conditions and little known about the most effective forms and dosage. Studies that have been undertaken have focused mainly on five areas: epilepsy; multiple sclerosis; chronic pain; chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting and palliative care⁷.

THE NSW NURSES AND MIDWIVES' ASSOCIATION RECOGNISES THAT:

- The endocannabinoid system is a unique system found in the brain and body that affects many important functions.
- Medicinal cannabis plays an important role for many patients in alleviating symptoms, most notably with regard to epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain, nausea and vomiting and palliative care⁸.
- NSW Health issued an information bulletin titled *Schedule 8 Cannabis Medicines and Unregistered Schedule 8 Medicines* that reiterated that staff cannot store or administer illegal cannabis preparations, referencing the *Drug Misuse and Trafficking Act 1985* (NSW)⁹.
- The legal and regulatory issues of medicinal cannabis are complex, and most nurses and midwives do not have a clear understanding of these¹⁰.
- The NSW Government recognises the potential for medicinal cannabis in specific patient groups and has established the *Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research and Innovation*. This centre aims to improve our understanding of cannabis and cannabis products for therapeutic purposes, and support evidence-based innovation¹¹.
- In November 2019, the Senate referred an inquiry into the 'Current barriers to patient access to medicinal cannabis in Australia'; the report from this inquiry was handed down in March 2020¹².

THE NSW NURSES AND MIDWIVES ASSOCIATION ADOPTS THE POSITION THAT:

- Access to medicinal cannabis must be supported where patients, in consultation with their authorised prescriber, receive therapeutic benefit.
- Further research is required to examine the benefits and risks of medicinal cannabis use in managing health conditions and symptoms¹³.
- Approved medicinal cannabis products should be affordable and easily accessible for patients through the PBS.
- A legal framework must be established so that patients or their carers who are found in possession of medicinal cannabis prescribed by an authorised prescriber, have a complete legal defence from arrest or prosecution.
- Nurses and midwives are well positioned to play a key role in the adoption of medicinal cannabis, as a therapeutic product¹⁴; the NSWNMA advocates for nurse practitioners to be able to prescribe medicinal cannabis for eligible patients. Education on medicinal cannabis – and the Endogenous Cannabinoid System (ECS) – must be expanded for nurses and

midwives. This education should be tailored to meet the needs, and scope of practice, of each profession¹⁵.

- Any information/education on medicinal cannabis works to reduce stigma and prejudice around medicinal cannabis, to break down barriers and ensure consumers feel comfortable having conversations with nurses and midwives¹⁶.
- There is a clear need for guidelines for nurses and midwives working across NSW. The 'Schedule 8 Cannabis Medicines and Unregistered Schedule 8 Medicines' bulletin highlights the complexities that nurses and midwives face, when caring for patients that are accessing unregulated supplies of cannabis. It is crucial that nurses and midwives have a clear understanding of the regulatory and legal frameworks supporting medicinal cannabis.

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