

MEDIA RELEASE

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AMA welcomes updated guidance on medicinal cannabis prescribing

The Australian Medical Association has welcomed the release of updated guidance to address unsafe prescribing of medicinal cannabis.

This move by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), in collaboration with the National Boards, responds to a surge in prescriptions for the Schedule 8 medicine and increasing reports of patient harm, including psychosis.

AMA President Dr Danielle McMullen said the proliferation of new direct-to-consumer, single-issue telehealth models had led to a surge in medicinal cannabis prescriptions.

“Current regulatory schemes were designed for a different healthcare system, built around in-person consultations and community pharmacy dispensing, but the landscape has changed significantly,” Dr McMullen said.

“The rise of the telehealth phenomenon has led to certain models that bypass traditional regulatory frameworks, posing risks to individual patients and the health system more broadly.

“These direct-to-consumer, single-issue telehealth models lack clear referral pathways or a feedback loop to GPs and other referrers.”

The updated guidance follows the AMA calling on health ministers to prioritise the issue of unsafe medicinal cannabis prescribing and to provide adequate resources to Ahpra and the National Boards to address these challenges effectively. The AMA has consistently supported the Therapeutic Goods Administration’s proposals to address these issues and highlighted the need for practitioners to be aware of regulatory compliance.

Ahpra’s updated guidelines remind practitioners to treat medicinal cannabis with the same caution as other drugs of dependence. The guidelines reiterate important principals including thorough patient assessment, clear therapeutic justification, management plans with defined exit strategies, coordination with other treating practitioners, avoidance of first-line use of medicinal cannabis, and the use of real-time prescription monitoring systems.

“This is a pleasing move from Ahpra to ensure prescribing practitioners are meeting their professional obligations and that guidelines are clear and obvious,” Dr McMullen said.

Dispensing medicinal cannabis is more complicated and risk prone when compared to arrangements for products on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG). Further clarity is still needed to ensure dispensers’ ordering and supply arrangements, and consignment style models, are compliant with regulatory requirements.

The AMA calls for stricter enforcement to prevent medicinal cannabis companies from exploiting special access schemes and avoiding ARTG listings, while ensuring these mechanisms remain available for those in need.

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