

FEDERAL HEALTH MINISTER MUST EXPLAIN TOBACCO AND MARIJUANA POLICY DISCREPANCIES

Montreal, May 30, 2017 – Tomorrow, on World No Tobacco Day, the federal Health Minister has an opportunity to explain the disturbing degree of incoherence in her recent approach to regulating tobacco and marijuana. While the Minister proposes plain and standardized packaging for tobacco products, despite cigarette packages already having a 75 per cent health warning and being hidden from public view at point of sale, she says all that is required for marijuana is a restriction on packaging or labelling to ensure product packaging is not appealing to young persons.

“Public explanation is needed as both marijuana and tobacco are substances with known health risks,” said Eric Gagnon, Head of Corporate and External Affairs, Imperial Tobacco Canada. “This suggests that marijuana and tobacco should face a similar regulatory framework, but the Minister appears to be headed in the opposite direction, giving far more leniency to the marijuana industry.”

Moreover, the youth usage rate for marijuana is higher than that for tobacco, and the Health Minister acknowledges that Canadian youth have the highest rate of marijuana use in the world at a time when tobacco use and youth smoking are at an all-time low in the country.

“There is clear policy incoherence, which is even more apparent considering the Minister claims the goal with both marijuana and tobacco legislation is to protect youth,” notes Gagnon. “How can two legislative frameworks, for products that both carry known health risks, have the same stated goal yet vastly different approaches?”

The federal government has gone to great lengths to claim its goal is to eliminate the black market for marijuana and suggests that taxes on marijuana will be kept low to allow competition with the illegal market. Yet, governments across Canada have and continue to tax cigarettes to an extent that it has contributed to the creation of an illegal market, which now accounts for more than 20 per cent of the tobacco market in the country.

“If the Minister truly believes her policy approach to marijuana is effective, then surely it can be applied to tobacco,” said Gagnon. “Instead, Parliament is about to have the spectacle of the Minister arguing on one day that branding on tobacco packaging lures youth to smoking and should be banned, while on the next day suggesting that branding should be allowed for marijuana to help compete against black market.”

Tomorrow is an opportunity for the federal Health Minister to demonstrate that she is serious about the health of Canadians, but focusing on excessive and ineffective measures that make it easier for illegal traffickers to counterfeit legal tobacco products is not the way to demonstrate that commitment. The Health Minister and her department officials should acknowledge the importance of alternative products – such as heated tobacco or vaping products – and prioritize the introduction of clear regulations, making them known and available to adult consumers, as soon as possible.

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