

NEWS RELEASE

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Addiction Medicine Leaders Call On Canadian Government to Decriminalize Drug Use

Bill-C22 will not stop people who use drugs from being treated as criminals, will not help them get the health care services they need, CSAM-SMCA says

CALGARY, Alberta — The [Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine](#) is calling on Justice Minister David Lametti to go further with Bill C-22 by decriminalizing drug use in Canada. In a [policy statement](#) published in the new issue of the [Canadian Journal of Addiction \(CJA\)](#), the society says Canada must stop treating people who use drugs like criminals and start providing the health care they need to recover from a life-threatening illness.

“The criminalization of drug use has been, and continues to be, an abject failure,” Policy Committee Chair Dr. David Martell said. “It is time for our government to listen to the voices of people who are experts in dealing with drug-related problems.”

The society says addiction is a health issue that requires evidence-based treatment supported by harm reduction services. Criminalization stigmatizes people who use certain drugs and disproportionately impacts racialized and marginalized communities. It deprives drug users of the health care and harm reduction services that they desperately need. Finally, it channels sick people into an overloaded criminal justice system that is neither designed nor equipped to help them heal.

“It is time for Canada to follow Portugal’s lead 20 years ago and decriminalize drug possession for personal use. It reduced stigma, problematic use, drug-related harms

and criminal justice overcrowding,” Martell said. “Now Portugal diverts people who use drugs away from the criminal justice system and directs those with problematic use toward treatment. Their criminal justice system fights crime, not illness.”

The call comes after Lametti on Feb. 18 tabled Bill C-22, which acknowledges that drug use is primarily a health and social issue but then stops short of decriminalizing possession for personal use.

“People who use drugs should go to treatment, not jail,” CSAM-SMCA President Dr. Jennifer Brasch said. “Criminalization stigmatizes people who use drugs, discourages them from seeking treatment, and saddles them with a criminal record. Young, racialized and marginalized Canadians suffer most. This is unacceptable to Canadians, and we have both the knowledge and the resources to do better.”

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The Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine is a national society of medical professionals and scientists committed to helping Canadians understand, accept, and recover from substance use disorders.