

Doctor talks workplace cannabis impact at symposium

by Angela Gismondi Oct 10, 2017

Just because something is legal and authorized by a doctor, doesn't mean it's safe, especially in a safety sensitive job.



At the Cannabis in Construction Symposium Dr. Melissa Snider-Adler, chief medical review officer for DriverCheck Inc., talked about the impacts of cannabis in the workplace, with the legalization of the substance anticipated for July 2018. The event, held Oct. 2 in Maple, Ont., was hosted by the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario** in partnership with the Ontario General Contractors Association.

Photo: ANGELA GISMONDI

That was the message from Dr. Melissa Snider-Adler at the Cannabis in Construction Symposium hosted recently by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Ontario General Contractors Association.

Snider-Adler is the chief medical review officer for DriverCheck Inc. which performs drug testing for companies in Canada. She informed the crowd about the potential impacts of marijuana in the workplace with the legalization of cannabis slated for July 1, 2018.

"It really is your responsibility to ensure a safe workplace and ensure that your employees, even those who are using substances, are safe," said Snider-Adler. "There have been cases where employers have been found criminally negligent because they did not deal with the issues and ensure that their workplace is safe. You have to balance both the duty to accommodate versus the duty to provide a safe environment."

Most people with a substance use disorder look like everybody else and 70 per cent of people with that disorder have a job and work, Snider-Adler noted.

"In my practice, my work as an addiction physician, I can say that the vast majority of my patients work in construction," she said.

That's one reason she emphasized having adequate drug and alcohol policies that will protect companies when marijuana is legalized.

"The first thing is to have a policy in place because that's something you need to protect yourselves," said Snider-Adler. "The second thing is you should really look at the jobs people are doing — is this really safety sensitive?"

Companies can consider drug testing if they do have concerns, she stated.

"When it comes to drug testing policies, it's not just about doing the drug test, it's about having a workplace that has something set up for people that have a substance use disorder," said Snider-Adler, adding it's important to have accommodations to help people with substance use disorders get the help they need.

"It's a whole program that's not just about drug testing, certainly not for the purposes of firing them."

Snider-Adler also said employers should be aware that marijuana is not what it used to be.

"In the '60s, '70s and '80s three per cent marijuana was what most people tried, six per cent was the real heavy duty stuff," she explained. "What we're seeing now is an average of 20 to 30 per cent THC. It is a totally different drug than it used to be with different effects on the brain."

The way that marijuana impairs does not look the same as alcohol, said Snider-Adler. "People compare it, but it's two totally different things and affects two totally different parts of the brain," she said, adding cannabis affects perception, cognitive abilities, memory, time distortion and the ability to concentrate on more than one task at a time. "Most jobs you have to be aware of multiple things at once. There is no safety sensitive job where you have to concentrate on one thing and one thing only."

Snider-Adler said there is a culture in Canada that marijuana is "no big deal."

"I hear all the time from people that failed to pass a drug test that it's basically legal. Well it's basically not legal. It's going to be legal, but at this point in time it's not," said Snider-Adler.

And, contrary to popular belief, it's not just young people using it, she said.

"I often hear it's not going to affect the workplace because it's mostly the 19 to 25 year olds and they're not in the workplace yet," said Snider-Adler. "The 55 to 60 (age bracket) is the largest growing number of marijuana users."

Snider-Adler explained an authorization for cannabis is not a prescription. Prescriptions, she said, are for real medications which go through a highly regulated process in order to get approved in Canada.

In order to be used legally, marijuana needs to be authorized by a physician and purchased through a Health Canada licensed producer.

Many people who are authorized to use cannabis for medical purposes do not have medical conditions that warrant the use of the substance and some physicians will give authorizations to patients without a medical evaluation, said Snider-Adler.

"Just because they have an authorization doesn't necessarily mean they have a disability, that is just something to keep in the back of your mind," she explained. "I think it's important that as employers you have a little bit of a sense of the fact that there are some people that do use marijuana and other drugs who do have a substance use disorder, do have a disability."