

“New York Gets Cannabis Public Education Started With Conversations”

A year ago, New York made history when the legislature passed the Marijuana Taxation and Regulation Act (MTRA), legalizing the possession and recreational use of cannabis, but only for adults 21 years old and over. This turned the page from decades of prosecution to a new framework focused on improving public health outcomes.

For more than 200 years, the Medical Society of Erie County, and its members, have helped chart a path forward as health care and, our understanding of it, have evolved. Our leaders founded the University at Buffalo School of Medicine and we continue to play a critical role in the development of Buffalo’s regional hospitals.

Cannabis legalization brings a new role for the medical community in helping our patients navigate the new terrain and help them make informed decisions on what’s best for them. It’s important that as the new industry evolves, the state also play a role in providing baseline public information to provide New Yorkers directly with these tools and encourage conversations with their health care providers.

For this reason, we’re thankful to see the Office of Cannabis Management, the new state agency established to oversee the new cannabis industry in New York, launch “Cannabis Conversations.” This is the first public health education campaign on cannabis in New York that seeks to deal with the facts and provide information to New Yorkers based on the latest research and essential parts of the law.

The first advertisement of the campaign, a 30-second piece that’s playing on television, radio, and social media, tells New Yorkers that through the campaign they will learn more about who can use, where to use, and how to use. It makes clear that cannabis is not for kids, reminds New Yorkers to keep their second-hand smoke away from others and to lock up their cannabis, as well the risks of driving while impaired. It then asks New Yorkers to visit cannabis.ny.gov to take a deeper dive and learn more.

This is a good start to broad based public education on a subject that for generations has largely been void of the facts and more likely to rest on fear tactics that have not been proven to drive down misuse or youth use. We look forward to hearing about the thoughtful conversations parents will be able to have with their children about the risks cannabis poses to their growing brains, and the discussions New Yorkers will have with each other about the risks of driving while impaired – ideally reminding one another to stay safe and not take the risk.

Public health education has long proven to be one of the best tools we have to fight misinformation and keep people safe, and providing it early on in the process of building a legal, regulated cannabis market is the right thing to do for New York.

More work will need to be done as the market evolves, too. Ensuring New Yorkers understand the risks of buying illicit cannabis products that have not been tested will grow in importance as tested, safe products become available in the adult-use market. Health care providers will also need tools to help decipher the differences and the risks for their patients.

The Erie County Medical Society is ready to work with the state and help develop these tools, as we have always developed new partnerships and evolved with the needs of our community. Cannabis legalization will be no different and we look forward to continuing to learn and grow with this latest evolution.