THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
CAVE HILL CAMPUS

Training for Health Care Providers in Therapeutic Prescribing of Medical Marijuana Products Workshop

Tuesday, May 21, 2019
9:00 a.m.

The Goddard Room
Sagicor Cave Hill School of Business and Management
Good morning and welcome to The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus.

We are exceedingly pleased and excited to be part of this seminal moment in Barbados’ history; a moment where shift The UWI can shift the conversation on a divisive issue and advance the implementation of a medical cannabis industry in the Caribbean. We do so, well aware of the polarizing views about whether the cannabis plant is an all-natural wonder drug or simply a dangerous drug.

First, let me state that The University of the West Indies is delighted to be collaborating with the Ministry of Health and Wellness in planning, delivering and hosting these workshops, on the therapeutic prescribing of medicinal marijuana products, over the next two days. I applaud the hard work and dedication of Dr. Sylvia Henry and her team at The Centre of Excellence in University Teaching and Learning (CETL) and Dr. Kenneth Connell, Lecturer in Clinical Pharmacology and Chair of the Ministry of Health and Wellness’ Drug Formulary Committee in bringing these workshops to fruition.

I also want to take this opportunity to public congratulate Dr. Connell on being named as the only person from the Caribbean on the World Health Organization (WHO) 16-member panel appointed to develop guidelines for the treatment of hypertension. Of course, the Campus is not surprised, just proud of your accomplishment.

We know the calibre of the research faculty at The UWI, Cave Hill Campus. Academic research has shown that the dispensation of cannabis-derived drugs for medicinal purposes could usher in a seismic shift in this region’s fortunes, with significant economic benefit accruing to many, including the state and health industry participants. The data also suggest that with a well-regulated medical cannabis sector, we could witness major improvement in the overall health and wellness or palliative condition of citizens, as they obtain relief from life-threatening ailments through cannabidiol products whose prescription and use is legally challenging at this time.

I speak of relief, for example, from the likes of acne, anxiety, schizophrenia, insomnia, menstrual pain, cancer and epilepsy, to name a few conditions.

Ladies and gentlemen, you may be happy to learn that today, we extend on the research and policy advocacy on which this Campus has engaged in relation to medical cannabis. Just recently, Ryan Hall, an enterprising student pursuing the MPhil in Pharmacology, presented his work on the use of cannabinoids in the treatment of epilepsy. His thesis proposes the use of cannabinoids in pre-clinical trials using mice. (In keeping with established practice, until we
progress to the stage of clinical trials in humans, mice will have to be the guinea-pigs - so to speak - for these scientific experiment).

I also wish to assure our law enforcement community that Mr. Hall’s work has not brought him into contact with any currently illegal substances since the pre-clinical trials will be undertaken in UK laboratories thousands of miles from these shores. In other words, while we await the necessary legislative changes that will create an enabling environment to facilitate this critical research, we are pressing ahead toward our objectives through collaborative international partnerships.

And that is not the extent of our cannabis research. Researchers Dr. Damian Cohall, who is a Senior Lecturer in Pharmacology and Dr. Alana Griffith, a Lecturer in Sociology, have been using their expertise to envision what an efficient and sustainable regional policy framework for medical cannabis should look like. They present this in their co-authored journal article entitled: Towards Conceptualising a Policy Framework for the Implementation of Medical Marijuana in a Small Island State in the Caribbean. These two outstanding researchers were recognized with a Campus award for Best Applied Research in 2018.

The Cave Hill Campus also took the cannabis conversations outside of the campus and hosted a Community Talks panel discussion under the theme: The Removal of Prohibitions on Marijuana. This was held last September at Queen’s College and formed part of The UWI’s 70th Anniversary commemorative activities. Two years earlier, we convened a symposium, Marijuana: Perpetual Problem or Potential Problem Solver?’ This was hosted by The Faculty of Social Sciences, while the Faculty of Medical Sciences, held a panel discussion to speak about the possibilities for medical marijuana in the region. So, the Campus has been engaged with, not only doing research but also in bringing information to our communities in order to inform public discourse on this controversial and contentious plant, but one, whose enormous economic potential is being exploited by industrialised nations.

Our many initiatives and research thrusts complement the UWI’s overall greater efforts in creating and adding to our existing knowledge about cannabis.

In her April budget speech this year, Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley noted that credible evidence on the effectiveness of cannabis as a medicinal treatment for everything from rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis to Parkinson’s disease and cancer could be seen and I quote “every week on CNN.” But, I would add, that there is just as much Caribbean knowledge that she could draw upon to build her case.

From as early as the 1940s, Jamaica was home to the first Ganja Enterprise, led by Leonard Percival Howell. The Rastafari Community occupied 500 acres of
land, called the Pinnacle Estate, where cannabis was cultivated and transported to England during the Second World War.

The UWI was also a leader in the development of medicines from the plant. In 1972, ophthalmologist Albert Lockhart and pharmacologist Dr Manley West at The Mona Campus began investigating the anecdotes of fishermen who used ganja teas to improve their night vision. They used their research to develop and release Canasol eye drops as a treatment for glaucoma in 1987. This was followed by Asmasol for asthma, Cantivert for glaucoma, Canavert for motion sickness and Cansens for viral infections.

Unfortunately, a lot of the groundbreaking and innovative work undertaken by Doctors Lockhart and West in the Department of Pharmacology is virtually unknown internationally, due to a prohibitive legislative environment. Jamaica finally made the move to decriminalize small amounts of cannabis and establish a licensing agency to legally regulate cannabis in 2015. Buoyed by this move, The University of the West Indies, Mona began the controlled growing of specific strains of marijuana in an attempt to identify the DNA profiles of the plants that same year.

Scarce Commodity was also established at the Jamaica campus, which is a cooperative structure established by The UWI to educate, provide technical support, enhance and market the potential of Jamaica’s medical cannabis industry in a sustainable way.

On the policy side, The UWI’s experts in the fields of medicine, health research, law, education and sociology were key members on the Regional Commission on Marijuana, which was established by the decision of the Twenty-fifth Inter-Sessional Meeting of CARICOM Heads of Government, in March 2014.

This Commission was chaired by Professor Rose-Marie Bell-Antoine, Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, included Dr. Alana Griffith, Lecturer in Sociology at Cave Hill.

As the region takes greater and accelerated steps towards decriminalization, The UWI remains ready to assist regional governments by providing our knowledge and research insights. This series of training enables the University to do just that, put our expertise to the service of the development of the region.

We have taken careful note of the fact that Canadian companies are interested in working with Barbados and other Caribbean nations as we develop our medical cannabis industries. We anticipate that the Barbados Government will adhere to its promise to keep Barbadians involved at all levels – especially those who have been historically ostracized and criminalized for using the plant.
You will therefore notice, ladies and gentlemen, that while this region has been debating the use of cannabis for medical, religious, recreational or other purposes, the University has been at the forefront of outlining the medical benefits suggested by our research.

I wish you all a very productive session and we look forward to continued partnerships with the Ministry in all facets of the health and wellness of this nation.

I thank you.

Professor V Eudine Barriteau, GCM
Pro Vice-Chancellor and Principal
May 21, 2019