



CANNABIS LEGALIZATION

— WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?



Joel Gervais, of CBI Health Centre, speaks to an industry workshop MHCA photo

“It’s about setting clear expectations for your workers, about their obligation to come to work unimpaired by any substance that can affect their ability to perform their job safely and productively.”

-Todd Turner, general manager at EF Moon Construction

The legalization of recreational cannabis was a hot topic for Manitoba’s heavy construction industry when the law changed in 2018.

A year later, it appears much of that hype was overblown, says Todd Turner, general manager at EF Moon Construction.

“Most companies in the heavy construction industry have taken this last year to update their existing alcohol and drug policies, as well as the fit-for-duty protocols,” he explains.

“The legalization of recreational cannabis was an opportunity for us to broaden the issues of impairment and substance abuse from a workplace point of view.”

Turner notes that impairment can come in many forms – sleep deprivation, over-the-counter cold medicine, and even stress. It is important that employees know the potential impact any of these sources of impairment.

“I think what legalization of recreational cannabis has done is put a spotlight on issues that already existed in most workplaces today,” Turner says. “It’s about setting clear expectations for your workers, about their obligation to come to work unimpaired by any substance that can affect their ability to perform their job safely and productively.”

Joel Gervais, addictions and training specialist at CBI Health Centre, says there has not been a whole lot to report on the issues from a workplace and, ultimately, from a safety perspective.

“Many employers have ‘stepped up’ and educated their employees on the signs, symptoms and impacts of cannabis and other impairing substances in the workplace, in addition to doing their due diligence in reviewing and updating policies,” he says. “Many companies are reaching out to associations, like the MHCA, to get good advice and training.”

Gervais says some of the advice he dispenses to employers is that this actually isn’t that new.

“If you were already doing a good job of monitoring and responding appropriately to substance abuse in the workplace you really shouldn’t be doing anything different.”

He stresses that the legalization of recreational cannabis in Canada doesn’t erode the employer’s right to insist workers are free from impairment when they show up to work. And that legalization does not change the employer’s right to control drug use where it affects the workplace.

“One of the key messages that I try to convey when I am training is that, regardless of whether the drug is legal or not, employers have the ‘absolute’ right to ensure a safe workplace,” Gervais says.

“I think that the legalization of cannabis strengthens the message, especially when employees say they have a ‘right’ to use whatever they want. Last time I checked, impairment wasn’t a basic human right.”



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