

Medical Marijuana

AIRING OUT THE SMOKE OF DOUBT

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On April 1, 2014, Canada will implement a drastically new set of regulations that will redefine the laws on the production and acquisition of medical marijuana, affecting over 35,000 patients nationwide. Patients will have to exclusively seek commercial vendors for medical marijuana and pay a much higher price compared to the costs of growing marijuana in their residences. This provides several benefits to the Canadian economy and protects against drug abuse, yet worries citizens and users who are trying to minimize costs. The Canadian government will require patients to obtain a prescription from a general physician, rather than a specialist, to gain access to medical marijuana. This new legislation therefore introduces a new source of pressure for general practitioners and makes them reluctant to support the bill. Still, with a plethora of viable solutions, such as increased safety and quality assurance for citizens who are wary about the new system, the commercialization of medical marijuana could prove to be a reasonable decision for the nation's future.

BACKGROUND

In 2001, Canada was the first country to pioneer a federal legislation regarding medical marijuana — a topic considered a taboo by many at the time.¹ The Marihuana Medical Access Regulations policy outlined the requirements a patient would have to meet in order to produce and consume medical marijuana as a treatment for a variety of ailments.² While this may have alleviated tension between the government and citizens regarding the use of marijuana, strict law enforcement pertaining to illicit drug use persisted. Between 2004 and 2005, 73% of the \$368 million spent on addressing issues caused by illicit drug use was used for law-enforcement, with the remaining 27% spent on treatment, research, prevention, and harm-reduction programs.³ There has been growing evidence that many of the dangers of illicit drugs may have been exacerbated by the increased law-enforcement, and Canada's Drug Strategy has been indolent in addressing these claims.⁴ Dr. Thomas Kerr, co-director at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, mentioned that "If Canada wants to fulfill its mission of reducing the most severe harms associated with illicit drug use, steps must now be taken to implement a truly evidence-based national drug strategy rather than shoveling millions of dollars towards these failed programs."⁵

The original Marihuana Medical Access Program will give way to a completely new set of rules under the title

Marihuana for Medical Purposes Regulations, effective April 1, 2014.⁵ All current authorizations and licenses will expire: the only legal access to medical marijuana will be through newly licensed producers.⁶ Instead of requiring a Health Canada permit, healthcare practitioners will be responsible for signing a medical document that enables a patient to purchase a specified amount of marijuana directly from a licensed producer.⁵ Rather than criminalizing illicit medical marijuana users, the regulations attempt to remove the negative stigma associated with users, allowing the industry to become more corporate.

IMPLICATIONS

THE NATION

According to Brian Hutchinson of *National Post Canada*, encouraging the commercial sale of medical marijuana provides several advantages to the general welfare of users, along with an inevitable boost to the nation's economy. Preventing consumers from growing marijuana in their own homes will prevent home invasions, fire hazards, and reduce the risk of its diversion to the black market.⁷ Furthermore, the quality and consistency of the product will be assured, due to specific guidelines imposed on licensed producers.

The new regulations for medical marijuana also provide an avenue for economic expansion. Health Canada's implementation of this program could recover the large sums of money spent on enforcing laws against illicit drugs over the past decade, which had a negligible impact on the nation's drug abuse problem. With the implementation of new medical marijuana policies over the next decade, Health Canada estimates that the number of medical marijuana consumers will increase tenfold to 309,000 due to its increased ease of accessibility. This surge in demand will fuel the growth of the legal marijuana industry, estimated to generate \$1.3 billion in annual revenue. Municipalities will also benefit from these operations, with licensed producers using local facilities, purchasing local power, paying business taxes, and expanding the job market.⁷

While the commercialization of medical marijuana could prove to be beneficial from an economic standpoint, patients may be reluctant to accept the new change, as lawsuits have already been filed in an effort to prevent the complete implementation of the regulations.⁷ The fact that there are currently four licensed producers in Canada is indicative of the monopoly of medical marijuana that could be potentially created in the future.⁸ According to Health Canada, the price of medical marijuana is expected

to rise drastically in the short run, which may dissuade a large portion of consumers from purchasing marijuana initially. Sophie Galarneau, an executive director of Health Canada's medical marijuana department, addressed these concerns: "We expect that over time, prices will be driven down by the free market." She believes that competition between licensed producers will aid in keeping prices at an affordable rate as time progresses after the initial spike.¹¹

Now that general practitioners can prescribe marijuana, patients no longer need to obtain the approval of a specialist. While this may cause doctors to feel additional pressure in prescribing medical marijuana, the increase in patient accessibility seems to be a commensurate benefit. Although Dr. Arnold Schoichet, a member of the Medical Cannabis Resource Centre, believes that medical marijuana is efficacious, he acknowledges why his colleagues may have apprehensions about the drug: "There are no guidelines for dosage or administration. No clear outlines of side effects and risks. There are no standards for preparation... It's a very awkward position for doctors to be in."¹²

CONCLUSION

Health Canada's resolute decision to completely restructure its policies on medical marijuana was not aimless; it was a strategic approach to push the nation forward in terms of controlled drug use and production, while redirecting revenue to the government. No matter the policy, when a large number of people are affected, there will be shortcomings. Yet the marijuana medical access legislation was not meant as an inconvenience to patients and doctors. With sufficient awareness and debate, new policies can be created to remedy any inconveniences that may arise in the future. As mentioned by Mark Gobuty, the co-founder of Peace Naturals (a licensed marijuana producer), "It's really about the purpose and intent of the medicine we can provide. If we can do one thing, we want to provide people with peace."¹⁰ ■

REVIEWED BY DR. MICHAEL WONG

Dr. Michael Wong (B.Sc., Ph.D.) is a professor at McMaster University in the Faculty of Health Sciences. His research involves applying a combination of physics, neurophysiology, and probability calculus to investigate tactile spatial acuity. The themes of his research include exploring the concept of enhanced tactile perception in the blind, and changes in tactile acuity during development and aging.

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