



Patients may defy new medical marijuana laws



Some patients licensed to grow their own medicinal marijuana are threatening to defy a new federal law that will require them to destroy their pot plants and purchase the drug from government-approved growers.

The new law, which comes into effect on April 1, ends the program through which some 37,000 Canadians grow marijuana to treat their own medical conditions, such as cancer, MS, arthritis or post-traumatic stress disorder. Starting April 1, the patients will have to destroy their remaining plants and purchase the drug via federally licensed growers.

Patients say that growing their own drugs costs them just cents a day. Buying from federally licenced growers, however, will jack the price up five to ten times higher. With some ill patients unable to work or receiving disability benefits, the higher cost is out of reach for many of them.

The federal government argues that the changes will standardize the potency of the drug, making it safer for patients. The government also argues that the move will curb criminal activity related to the program, such as thefts and home invasions at patients' residences.

Joanne, who asked that her last name be withheld for privacy reasons, has been growing her own cannabis for two years to treat the pain of her severe arthritis. She blends the buds into an oil, at a cost of pennies a day.

But under the new rules, the cost will spike to \$2,800 per month.

"I know that I can't afford to put that type of money up to access medical marijuana, but I know I don't want to live without the oil," Joanne told CTV News through tears. "It has made such a difference in the quality of my life."

Burnaby, B.C. lawyer John Conroy has launched a constitutional challenge to the new rules that will be heard on March 18. Conroy argues that the federal government must give patients prescribed medical marijuana a choice.

"If you can do it for yourself, why should you not be able to do so if you can't afford what is being offered there in the market," Conroy asked.

According to Conroy, 60 per cent of patients who have prescriptions for medical marijuana are on disability, such as Edith, whose last name is also being withheld for privacy reasons. Edith is a cancer survivor who suffers from a painful bone disorder that is controlled with cannabis oil.

Edith says that purchasing pot from a federally licenced grower will set her back \$3,800 per month.

"I don't know anyone who can afford that, working or not," Edith said. "And most of us are not working."

Meanwhile, police say they have uncovered abuses of the medical marijuana program, according to The Canadian Press.

In the affidavit, RCMP Cpl. Shane Holmquist says investigations have turned up evidence of trafficking for personal gain, as well as organized crime.

In one case, a grower stated one room of marijuana was for medical purposes while another was a so-called mortgage helper, Holmquist wrote in the affidavit. Holmquist also noted that organized crime groups offered cancer patients money if they obtained a pot-growing licence and made the criminal their designated grower.

Health Canada has also said that growing operations in patients' homes were a fire hazard, and also exposed both residents and neighbours to break-ins and home invasions. Officials also found it difficult to inspect growing facilities for safety.

Patients who comply with the new rules but cannot afford to buy from the eight government growers licenced so far may have to return to using conventional prescription medicines that offered them little relief.

Edith fears that her quality of life will diminish if she can no longer afford the marijuana.

“I won't have a life left,” she said. “I will be back bed-ridden, unable to be able to support myself.”

With a report from CTV's medical specialist Avis Favaro and producer Elizabeth St. Philip