



Ready set grow!
Medicinal pot industry prepares to meet demand



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Starting on April 1, the government is dramatically changing the medical marijuana business, and only commercial-sized companies will be able to produce and distribute to people with valid prescriptions.

Under the new rules, which replace the Marijuana Medical Access Program, Canadians who are currently licensed to possess marijuana for medical purposes will no longer be able to grow their own or purchase marijuana from small-scale producers.

The Peace Naturals Project sells about 14 different strains of medical marijuana for patients with prescriptions from licensed doctors.

The company is one of six licensed pot producers approved by Health Canada to sell commercially produced marijuana, ahead of Canada's new rules governing medical marijuana production.

Health Canada says the new approach will make it easier for patients who need medical marijuana to get a safer, more standardized product, through companies like The Peace Naturals Project.

Established in 2011, CEO and founder Mark Gobuty says the company now receives about 2,400 calls a week from patients with a variety of ailments, from loss of appetite due to chemotherapy, to veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"We don't sell anything or provide anything that's going to cure," Gobuty told CTV News. "We're just trying to make things a little bit better through relief and self-care."

And family physician Dr. Danial Schacter, who prescribes medical marijuana to patients for whom other treatments have failed, says the new rules are taking marijuana "out of the dark underworld and bringing it into the mainstream, and making it corporate as opposed to something that is seen as a back-alley industry."

"The fact that all the production will be concentrated under corporations and be regulated by Health Canada, makes it (such) that we will be able to account for all the marijuana that's being produced," he added.

While Schacter has seen the benefits of marijuana in patients undergoing chemotherapy and people living with HIV/AIDS, other doctors are expressing discomfort with Canada's new medical marijuana rules.

Some say its "inappropriate" for them to serve as the sole gatekeepers of the drug.

Under the new Marijuana for Medical Purposes Regulations, patients will only require a document signed by a health-care professional rather than a Health Canada permit to obtain marijuana.

"We have now been made into the gatekeepers of people using marijuana in a very peculiar way," Dr. William Cunningham, president of Doctors of BC, told CTV News. "It's a very uncomfortable position for us to be in."

And other health-care professionals are skeptical of the drug, saying it hasn't been studied enough for doctors to fully understand its benefits.

The Canadian Medical Association released a response to Health Canada's new medical marijuana regulations in a report published in February 2013. While they acknowledge the benefits of the drug for some people, they say claims from patients and health professionals "remain inadequately supported by scientific research."

And after surveying about 600 physicians in 2012, the CMA found that 64 per cent of respondents were concerned that patients who requested medical marijuana may actually be using it for recreational purposes.

With a report from CTV News' Medical Specialist Avis Favaro and Senior Producer Elizabeth St. Philip