

Faces of Pot: Medical Marijuana User



Keith Beaty / Toronto Star

Medicinal pot user Matt Mernagh suffers from scoliosis, fibromyalgia, depression, and seizures caused by an inoperable brain tumour.

By: Isabel Teotonio Living reporter, Published on Tue Jan 14 2014

Every morning Matt Mernagh wakes up feeling “tenderized,” as though his body has been pounded by a mallet all night. The first thing he does is turn on his vaporizer and fill the chamber with marijuana. He brushes his cat Penny Lane while he waits for the balloon to fill.

It’s called “wake and bake,” says Mernagh, who suffers from scoliosis, fibromyalgia, depression and seizures caused by a rare brain tumour.

The machine heats up the marijuana, releasing its active ingredients into a vapour that fills a balloon-like bag. Mernagh attaches a mouthpiece and inhales deeply. As he exhales, little bits of ache are released from his fragile 5-foot-7 and 105-pound frame.

“I’m cursed with pain,” says the 40-year-old Toronto writer and pot activist. A mere pat on his back can unleash a torrent of agony.

After hitting the vaporizer, which is healthier than inhaling smoke, the pain eases enough to allow him to do some stretches on a yoga mat. He can then sit comfortably for 15 minutes at his desk, where he’s working on a sequel to his book *Marijuana Smoker’s Guidebook: The Easy Way to Identify and Enjoy Marijuana Strains*.

It’s only then that he musters the strength to go to the kitchen for his morning coffee where a sign that reads “Dude Where’s My Bong?” hangs on the wall. Real marijuana leaves are glued to the table top.

“They’re just so beautiful,” says Mernagh, running his finger over the leaves. His admiration is evident throughout the west-end apartment he shares with a flat mate — even the shower curtain, bath mats and toilet seat lid are decorated with marijuana motifs.

Despite pot’s therapeutic powers, Mernagh’s pain never completely goes away. He has continuous pain shooting from the base of his head down the left side of his body. He uses five to seven grams of pot throughout the day to keep the pain in check, paying anywhere between \$5 to \$10 per gram.

He’s not alone. There are about 37,500 medical marijuana users approved by Health Canada and there are countless others who self-medicate without a licence. Under the new regulations that take full effect April 1, the number of medicinal users is expected to keep rising, now that the illness categories have been lifted and nurse practitioners, in addition to doctors, can write prescriptions. Health Canada estimates in a decade there will be 450,000 users.

Mernagh’s whole life has been tinged with pain. He was born with scoliosis, a curve in the spine, and is believed to have been born with a brain tumour, which was discovered five years ago when he started having seizures. As a teenager, he developed fibromyalgia, causing such tremendous pain in his

muscles, joints and tendons that he grew depressed and his doctor prescribed Demerol, an opioid pain reliever.

He was in his second year at St. Clair College in Windsor, studying journalism, when he first tried pot. For the first time in his life, he felt “amazing.”

“It was the most eye-opening experience,” says Mernagh. The pot was better at managing pain than the Demerol and Percocet.

“Opioids are too harsh,” he says. “It pretty much puts you in bed.” By comparison, he can function on pot.

“Opioids are like taking a big sledgehammer to me. And marijuana is like taking a small little hammer (to the pain).”

He initially started growing pot, but wasn't very good at it and supplemented buying marijuana from the Toronto Compassion Centre, a not-for-profit dispensary of medical marijuana to members.

As he grew more involved with the medical marijuana community in the late '90s, he began attending the Global Marijuana March and in 2005 started the 4/20 rallies in and around the GTA — both are annual events calling for the legalization of cannabis. His activism has since extended to Pot TV, a web-based video channel, where he hosts The Mernahuana Zone, a live webcast from Vapor Central, a vapour lounge on Yonge St.

When the medical marijuana program was introduced by Health Canada in 2001, requiring doctors to sign the declaration for patients to legally possess pot, Mernagh's doctor refused. So, he continued growing illegally and buying it from the compassion centre.

Over time, he did develop a green thumb and a connection to his plants.

“As a personal grower, it was very, very therapeutic,” he says. “There's something about growing it that makes you feel connected to your health.”

But that all came to a halt in April 2008 when the fire alarm went off in his St. Catharines apartment and Niagara Regional Police discovered 70 plants and charged him with production.

At trial, Mernagh argued many Canadians, like him, needed the drug to ease symptoms, but couldn't legally access it. In April 2011, an Ontario Superior Court justice agreed, saying the marijuana program was unconstitutional because legitimately sick people couldn't access the drug, forcing them into criminal acts. In February 2013, the Court of Appeal overturned that decision, ordering a new trial. But last November the charge was stayed.

In recent months, his family doctor has reversed his opinion on cannabis. Mernagh suspects it had something to do with last summer's CNN documentary *Weed*, by chief medical correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta on the medical benefits of cannabis.

Mernagh was given a prescription, required under incoming medical marijuana regulations, but will still not be legally allowed to grow his own pot. He must buy it from a licensed commercial producer.

Although Mernagh isn't opposed to private industry supplying weed, he says medical users should still be allowed to grow their own, which costs between \$1 and \$4 a gram. Market prices are expected to be between \$6 and \$12 a gram.

Mernagh says many users are on Ontario Disability Support Program and fixed incomes and may be forced to choose between buying food or medicine. He suspects some will continue growing their own and risk arrest.

Mernagh counts himself among the luckier ones. While he too is on disability, he gets financial help from his family, income from his book and is given weed for review.

"I'm going to be hurting, but not as hurting as my friends will be. . . . There are people out there I really worry about."