

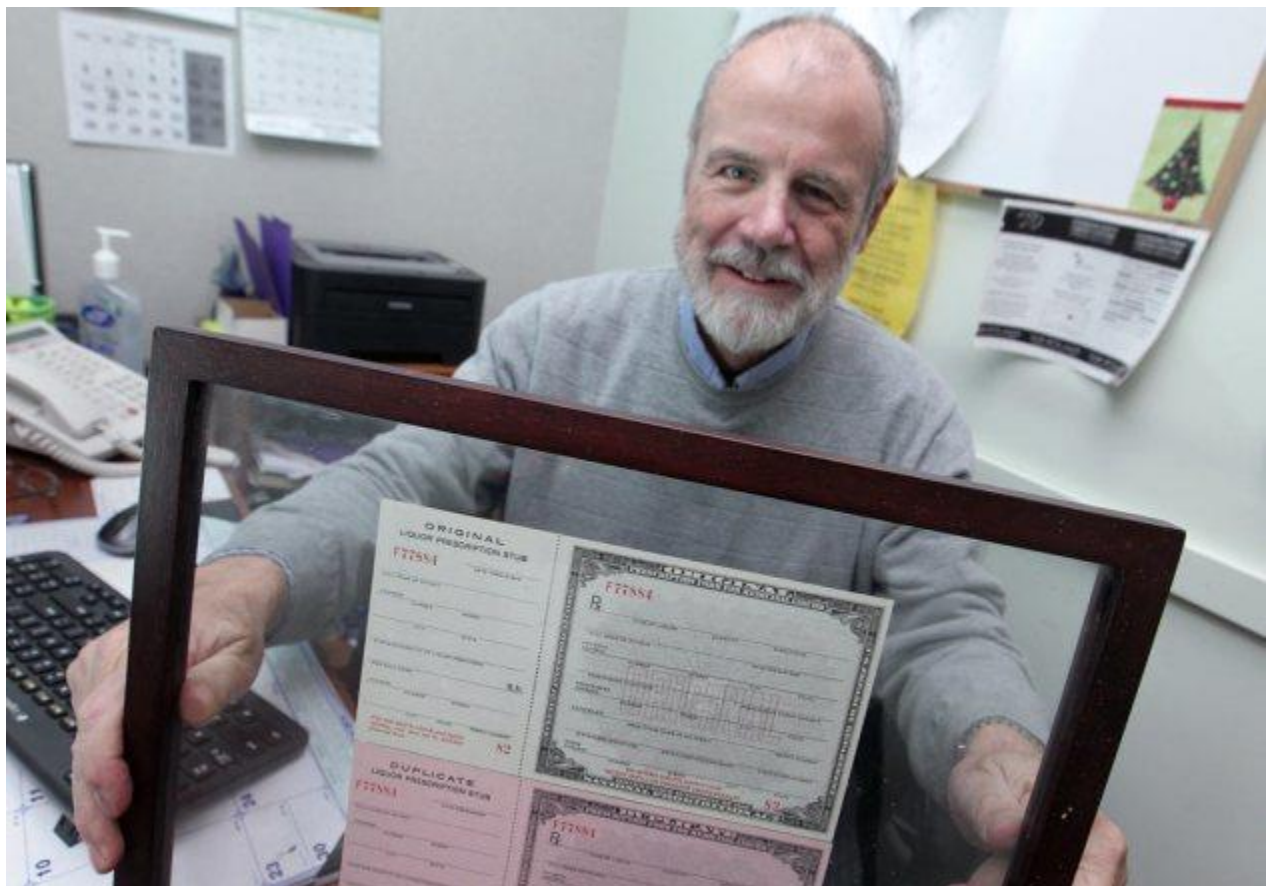
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NEWS

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Going to pot? While docs are shy to prescribe, Windsor to host cannabis clinic



Dr. Tony Hammer holds a prescription for medicinal liquor from 1931 that hangs in a glass frame in his office, Friday, Dec. 5, 2014. Hammer said he does not believe in prescribing medicinal marijuana. (DAX MELMER/The Windsor Star)

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Dr. Tony Hammer treats drug addicts and people seeking pain relief — the latter sometimes feeding the former — but don't expect him to jump aboard the medical marijuana bandwagon.

"I am utterly incapable of distinguishing between those who need it and those who enjoy it," said Hammer.

He's convinced most of the tens of thousands of Canadians prescribed marijuana for what ails them medically are instead using it "recreationally."

And what that means for this Windsor doctor, is that companies like Leamington's Aphria Inc., now being licensed to commercially grow and sell medical marijuana, are "in competition with the illegal grower" for the same market.

Hammer's advice to his colleagues is to follow the no-nonsense advice of their profession's governing body, the Canadian Medical Association, don't prescribe pot to patients.

What is medical marijuana?

Refers to the use of cannabis and its active ingredients such as tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) as medical therapy to treat disease or alleviate symptoms. Marijuana comes from the dried flowers of the female cannabis plant.

Used for many years to treat pain, reduce nausea and vomiting. More recently, used to address a variety of symptoms, from lack of appetite and insomnia to PMS and seizures.

Many different strains with different properties to target different symptoms.

THC is the psychoactive ingredient that provides the "buzz," or feeling of euphoria, and provides pain relief. CBD has a more prolonged affect and helps manage pain, inflammation.

The product is retail-priced per gram, which is about enough to roll two joints for smoking. The pot can also be vaporized.

“Because of the lack, at this time, of robust scientific evidence of its effectiveness and safety ... we’re stepping away from this as a profession,” said Dr. Tim O’Callahan, an Amherstburg family physician and the new president of the Essex County Medical Society.

The Canadian Medical Association, the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the Federation of Medical Regulatory Authorities of Canada are among those urging doctors to avoid steering patients to the purported benefits of cannabis.

Even Health Canada, the agency tasked with licensing the producers that grow and sell medical marijuana, as well as with drawing up the guidelines under which they operate, has launched an expensive advertising campaign on the dangerous effects of weed.

Canadians must turn to Health Canada’s website to find out where to get medical marijuana, but the information provided is limited and the federal agency also urges patients seeking relief to stay away from pot.

In bold print above the government agency’s list of those allowed to sell pot comes a stark warning that “marijuana is not an approved drug or medicine in Canada. The Government of Canada does not endorse the use of marijuana.”

Health Canada was forced into what Joseph del Moral of CanvasRx, a Toronto-based cannabis counselling service, describes as a “kind of schizophrenic” position on pot after the federal court ordered Ottawa to provide “reasonable access to a legal source of marijuana when authorized by a physician.”

The system that was replaced last spring permitted patients to grow their own, a method of delivery that led to concerns by police that users could be selling some of their product on the side.

Health Canada's 'bizarre' stance on pot

The legally approved sellers of medical marijuana are prohibited from advertising the purported health benefits of the product they grow. Last month, almost all the producers approved so far received warning letters from Health Canada threatening action if they didn't rid their websites of such things as photos of what they sell.



Joseph del Moral is one of the co-founders of CanvasRx, a Toronto-based counselling service for medical marijuana users. (Handout courtesy of CanvasRx)

At the same time as doctors are being urged not to prescribe cannabis, Health Canada's guidelines require patients to get a doctor's signature before they can purchase any pot from a licensed supplier.

"I think it's a bizarre situation," said O'Callahan.

But medical marijuana's proponents promise that relief is on the way. The authorities were not always so cold to cannabis, known and valued by ancient civilizations and in medieval times for its medicinal properties.

The Canadian courts have ordered a reluctant federal government to open the legal doors ever so slightly on medical marijuana, and the first who have passed through are confident more acceptance and support is inevitable.

And Windsor will play a role in getting there.

If local doctors don't want to shoulder the burden of prescribing pot, the advocates argue, then doctors who are already on-side will be brought in. And if the medical community is concerned the hard scientific evidence is lacking, then some of the local area's first legally harvested pot will be devoted to research.

Windsor will soon host a "cannabis clinic," and some Windsor cancer patients will soon be part of a medical study looking at marijuana's effectiveness in treating severe pain.

"We decided to tackle this head-on," del Moral said.

"We realized there was a piece missing ... a surprising number of doctors are marijuana-naïve," said del Moral, one of the entrepreneurs behind the company established in April to assist those seeking medical relief through marijuana.

Windsor to get pro-pot medical clinic

Shortly after its creation, CanvasRx founded Canadian Cannabis Clinics, which opened its first operation in St. Catharines in September, with marijuana-knowledgeable staffing, including a physician and "cannabis counsellor."

Clinics in Mississauga and Etobicoke will be opening in the coming weeks, and then, by the spring, it should be Windsor's turn, said del Moral.



Medical marijuana production at Aphria in Leamington, ON.

“Windsor’s not well-served at all,” said del Moral, who is unaware of any local doctors openly prescribing pot, despite what he sees as a patient demand. “We ask people to come in with a referral from their family doctor, but if their family doctor is opposed ... the patient can see us,” he said.

Ottawa changed the medical marijuana rules last April to require patients with doctor-supplied prescriptions to purchase pot from licensed producers.

Before, approved patients were permitted to grow their own pot. By last spring, Health Canada was reporting there were about 40,000 registered medical marijuana users in the country, a figure that had been rising quickly as more and more Canadians began turning to legal pot.

The work of CanvasRx, including a website with information on the many different strains of cannabis offered commercially and how each targets various illnesses and symptoms, is paid for by a “small processing fee” from the producers with each sale, said del Moral.

The Cannabis Clinics, which look no different than any other medical office, are paid through OHIP and will offer their services to patients for free.

One Windsor user of medical marijuana, whose approval to grow his own pot came under the old regime, said he's been referring others to the Toronto clinics. The patient, who asked not to be identified, said it was "frustrating" that other locals who feel marijuana might help them are now "forced to continue to use the black market" despite court rulings that Canadians should be given legal access.

Next week: Part 2

Take a look inside cannabis producer Aphria Inc. in Leamington, one of just 15 corporate producers licensed so far by Health Canada.

The new Marijuana for Medical Purposes Regulations will replace thousands of personal producers with a smaller number of commercial growers whose product is kept secure and whose output is closely tracked and reported.

Leamington's Aphria Inc. is among the most recent of only 15 corporate producers licensed so far. At one point, Health Canada faced a backlog of more than 1,100 other applications needing vetting.

Aphria's CEO Vic Neufeld acknowledges that, while there might be a wealth of "patient evidence" on the efficacy of medical marijuana in treating a range of illnesses, there is a dearth of hard science to back it up.

"Human evidence and patient testimonials ... that's the best we can do for now," said Neufeld.

Windsor patients to test pot

"There's very limited evidence now," said Dr. Caroline Hamm, a medical researcher with the Windsor Regional Cancer Program. "It's very controversial because marijuana is also a recreational drug ... (but) if it's something that can help people, it has to be validated," she added.

Hamm is preparing a clinical trial for the new year that will see palliative care physicians administer medical marijuana supplied by Aphria, which is sponsoring the research, to a limited number of local patients whose pain levels are “poorly controlled” by standard drugs.



Medical marijuana production at Aphria in Leamington, ON. (DAN JANISSE/The Windsor Star)

Part of the problem until now has been that, because marijuana was illegal – and remains so, for the most part – the research that has taken place has focused mainly on the harm caused by a criminalized drug rather than on the potential benefits.

Many of those studies have focused on youth and the negative effects of regular pot use on the developing brain. But other studies, including a recently published survey of fibromyalgia patients, show medical marijuana can be even more effective than conventional opioids in the treatment of severe, chronic pain.

“It’s not the holy grail, as some make it out to be, but it’s another treatment option,” said Dr. Ryan Yermus, a Toronto-based family physician who runs a medical practice dealing with addictions.

Yermus said there’s plenty of scientific literature on marijuana, and he argues it’s far less dangerous than the opioids and other approved medications conventionally prescribed to deal with pain.

“You need to keep an open mind. I don’t think it’s unreasonable if the patient is reporting it’s having a positive effect and wants to pursue it,” said Yermus. He’s also the medical director at Medical Marijuana Clinics of Canada, which in June became the country’s first such service for patients.

“Many of my colleagues are unwilling to prescribe. There’s not enough guidelines out there,” said Dr. Gary Ing, the chief of medical staff at Windsor Regional Hospital. “But this is just the beginning ... I only wish we had more information,” he added.

Ing said he wouldn’t rule out signing one of the “medical documents” Health Canada requires of those wishing to purchase marijuana from a licensed producer, but he’s yet to be convinced by any of his patients who have approached him on it at his family practice.

He agrees with criticism about the lack of hard scientific evidence on the safety and efficacy of pot, as well as with the absence of guidelines from professional bodies.

Aphria’s Neufeld said that, in addition to funding scientific research, the company will be following up with all its customers to gauge the pros and cons of whichever marijuana strain was purchased by the patient to treat their particular illness or symptom.

CanvasRx has also begun a tracking system of attributes and side-effects for the various producers’ products and strains it lists, with patients also rating the products. For example, users so far of Canna Farms’ Master Kush, selling for \$8 a gram, give it a 100 per cent rating for alleviating chronic pain.

Del Moral said it's still early days, but as the data base gets more comprehensive, it will be another helpful tool for those seeking medical relief through marijuana. CanvasRx is already trying to make it simple, with visitors to its website asked to select a symptom – anything from loss of appetite, insomnia and depression to stress, PMS and seizures – and then directed to the types of strains likely to help.

Hammer, who runs a methadone clinic in Windsor to help drug abusers overcome addictions – including to prescription medications – said the current “corporatization” of marijuana and the marketing of its purported benefits reminds him of what business did with tobacco and alcohol.

On his office wall at the Erie-St. Clair Clinic is a framed prescription from the Prohibition era. Alcohol may have been banned at the time, but armed with a doctor's prescription, you could buy booze.

“They're putting us in the exact same position,” Hammer said of Health Canada making doctors the gatekeepers of pot while also decrying its use.

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