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Medical marijuana to sell for \$5 per gram

There is no question physicians will play a crucial role in implementing Canada's new interim policy for providing medical marijuana, but many questions remain about how they will do it.

Under the interim policy, announced July 9, the 582 Canadian patients who have met requirements of the Marijuana Medical Access Regulations (MMAR) will be allowed to buy 30 marijuana seeds for \$20, and then grow them for medical purposes. They will also be able to buy dried marijuana for \$5 per gram, or about \$140 an ounce. (Black-market marijuana costs \$300 to \$750 an ounce, according to the RCMP.) Health Canada currently has 370 kg of marijuana with a THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) content of 10% ready for distribution. Physician approval is required before patients can receive it.

The seeds and marijuana will be provided by Prairie Plant Systems Inc. in Flin Flon, Man., which is under contract with Health Canada to produce marijuana for clinical trials. The marijuana will be sent to participating physicians for distribution purposes; only doctors who have signed a patient's MMAR form will be asked to do this. Cindy Cripps-Prawak, director of the Office of Cannabis Medical Access, said MDs "are acting as an intermediary for Health Canada" in the distribution.

She said the amount provided "will be based on the dosage recommended by the physician," and this could be as much as 4.2 g per day (about 6 cigarettes). There are no clinical guidelines. Setting the exact dosage is a "challenge Health Canada and doctors share," Cripps-Prawak added. For health reasons, patients will be encouraged to use the drug as a tea or in baked goods instead of smoking it.

Ottawa was forced to put an interim policy in place after the Ontario Superior Court ruled that the federal regula-

Neurosurgeon takes health care helm in Quebec

At the best of times, the health portfolio in Quebec is not for the faint of heart.

Yet Dr. Philippe Couillard, Quebec's new health minister, appears undaunted by the challenge even though he is a political neophyte — probably because the 46-year-old neurosurgeon is quite accustomed to working under pressure. "I realize the scope of the task and mandate that the premier has entrusted me with," Couillard told *CMAJ*. "But I feel entirely ready to assume it."

He has his work cut out for him. The previous Quebec government was dogged by health care controversies because of long waiting lists and congested emergency departments (EDs). Couillard recently announced an annual injection of \$240 million to help address those and other concerns, including \$60 million to shorten surgical waiting lists and \$25 million to unclutter EDs.

He gained first-hand experience with these problems while practising in Sherbrooke, where he was head of surgery at the Centre hospitalier universitaire de Sherbrooke. "The vast majority of people are satisfied with the quality of care they receive," he insists. "The problem is access — the waiting lists. People no longer have confidence that they will be able to see their doctor in time, they no longer have confidence that they will have their surgery or diagnostic test in time. And that is what gives rise to this loss of confidence, this cynicism toward the public system."

Couillard says solving the system's problems will require more than money. He spent a week in Alberta before the election at the behest of Liberal leader Jean Charest. "It's not that we are going to do the same thing as in Alberta. But there are certain elements that were done there that will strongly inspire us, including the method of financing the regions. We want the management to be a lot closer to the places where the services are offered."

Couillard has already spent more than half his life in medicine. A physician by age 22, he was a neurosurgeon at 28. He practised in Montreal and Saudi Arabia before moving to Sherbrooke in 1996.

Although pundits question his lack of political experience, they acknowledge his familiarity with the system. "Already people in the ministry have remarked just how much easier it is to brief me on dossiers," says Couillard. "Having practical knowledge makes a big difference."

Sherbrooke neurosurgeon Jacques Boucher considers Couillard's decision to enter the political realm a "big loss" to medicine because he was at the height of his career. He says his former colleague is decisive and "will have a very independent spirit" as a politician.

Couillard performed his last procedure 3 days before the Quebec election on Apr. 14. Boucher says Couillard relished complicated cases, and this should serve him well in government. "Philippe loves challenges more than anything else," he says. — *Brenda Branswell, Montreal*



Couillard: luckily, he likes challenges

tions were unconstitutional because they did not provide a distribution method. The court gave the government 6 months to act. If it had not, the 582 exemptions allowing medicinal use of the drug would have become invalid.

Although Ottawa tried to put a positive spin on the policy, CMA President Dana Hanson was less than impressed. "Our unease over use of medical mari-

juana has been ignored in this new policy," he said.

However, Hanson also acknowledged that despite physicians' displeasure over their unsought role in the medical marijuana debate, they must continue to participate in it. "The government needs to get it right, so we continue to be willing to work with them," he said. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*