

Marijuana strains doctor-patient relationship

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Medical marijuana is plainly “bad medicine,” says the president of the CMA.

Laura Eggertson, Ottawa, Ont.

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New federal regulations that cast doctors as the “gatekeepers” to medical marijuana have increased pressure on them to authorize access to what is effectively an unproven drug, the head of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) has told delegates to its annual meeting.

“It puts physicians in a very awkward situation and it strains the physician-patient relationship,” CMA President Dr. Louis Hugo

Francescutti told reporters at an Aug. 18 news conference in Ottawa. “It’s just plain bad medicine to prescribe a product when we don’t know how it works, we don’t know when it works, who it works for, how it interacts or how much to prescribe....”

Francescutti made his remarks following federal Health Minister Rona Ambrose’s address to approximately 250 delegates and 400 observers at the annual gathering.

The CMA's long-standing position is that there is insufficient rigorous evidence supporting marijuana’s use as a therapeutic agent. Under new federal regulations that took effect Apr. 1, 2014, patients can only get medical marijuana if their doctor signs an evaluation form and specifies the daily dosage. The patient can then buy from a federally licensed producer. Physicians argue that the evaluation form is essentially a prescription — without any guidelines regarding the effective dose or indications for marijuana.

In a position that reflects the Conservative government’s antipathy for the whole area of medical marijuana, an arena the courts forced them to wade into, Ambrose agreed doctors are in a “precarious situation” when authorizing its use.

“The majority of doctors don’t want to prescribe and I would encourage them not to do it if they don’t want to,” she said. At the same time, she insisted no one is better placed than physicians to be gatekeepers to marijuana.

Medical marijuana is unique because it is an herbal product, it didn’t come from the pharmaceutical industry and so didn't undergo

conventional drug development scrutiny, and its use is patient-driven, Dr. Mark Ware, a pain relief specialist, told delegates at an information session on medical marijuana.

“It’s something that most of us struggle with,” said Ware, who is a pain medicine specialist at the Montreal General Hospital and the Montreal Neurological Institute. “We’re not taught about this in medical school.”

But most of doctors’ concerns can be addressed, in part by reading existing studies on the impact of smoking marijuana, using it in essential oil form or inhaling it from a vapour device, Ware said. Doctors can be assured that they are following the right course of action if they then have a conversation with existing patients and explore the use of prescription forms of cannabis.

“There’s a basic ‘Cannabinoid 101’ that physicians should [undergo so they] ... have that information to help them make that decision with their patient,” Ware said in a later interview.

Mark Nixon, one of 10 patients Ware treats using medical marijuana, told meeting attendees that smoking just one gram a day allows him an uninterrupted six to seven hours of sleep each night and eases the spasticity of his muscles. Seven years after a car accident left Nixon a paraplegic, medical marijuana helps him live a comfortable life, including helping to coach basketball without the adverse effects of other medications he has been prescribed.

“I don’t want to be considered a pot-head. I’m trying to live a better life,” says Nixon, who is from Montreal.

If physicians don't educate themselves, patients' lack of access to doctors willing to authorize marijuana will increasingly drive them to a handful of physicians advertising their willingness to fill out authorization forms — for a fee.

Doctors should not be paid or reimbursed by provincial health plans for filling out those forms, said Dr. Trevor Theman, president of the Federation of Medical Regulatory Authorities of Canada. “You're being paid for seeing a patient and for the application of your clinical knowledge and judgment — you're not being paid for writing a prescription.”

That pronouncement did not sit well with several doctors in the audience, who argued they charge patients non-insured fees for filling out many other types of forms.

Federal ad campaign

Earlier on Aug. 18, the non-medical use of marijuana garnered delegates' attention when Ambrose responded to a decision by the CMA, along with the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, not to support a multi-million federal advertising campaign. Health Canada is launching the campaign to discourage youth from smoking marijuana and misusing prescription drugs.

“The educational campaign has now become a political football on Canada's marijuana policy and for this reason the CFPC, CMA and Royal College will not be participating,” the medical organizations said in a statement Aug. 16. “We did not, and do not, support or

endorse any political messaging or political advertising on this issue.”

Their statement came after Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau complained that the federal government was spending taxpayers’ money to finance a partisan advertising campaign. Trudeau has said he supports the Liberal Party’s policy to legalize marijuana, on the grounds that it would make it easier to control access to the drug and take its sale out of the hands of organized crime.

In a news conference, Ambrose denied using the advertising campaign as a political tactic. “Let me be clear: telling kids not to smoke pot is not a partisan attack on Justin Trudeau by Health Canada. It is a sound public health policy backed by science,” Ambrose said. “Whether pot is legal or illegal, the health risks of smoking marijuana remain the same.”

In the run-up to the expected 2015 federal election, associating Trudeau’s name with marijuana appears to be part of the Conservative campaign strategy. Several Conservative MPs have distributed flyers to their constituents claiming that Trudeau and the Liberals are advocating marijuana sales in local stores, or talking up its use in visits to schools.

“I think Justin Trudeau made this a political issue by saying Health Canada’s anti-pot smoking campaign was a thinly veiled attack on him,” Ambrose told the news conference. “We’ve been advocating for youth to not smoke marijuana for a long time and we will continue to do so.”