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State trying to recruit more medical marijuana doctors

Officials hoping to eliminate stigma among physicians

By Ken Dixon

With only a small fraction of the state's doctors participating in Connecticut's medical marijuana program, the agency that's running it has begun a public-service blitz.

The goal is to break through the stigma and lack of information that seems to be holding doctors back from registering, which they need to do to be able to prescribe the drug.

The state is reaching out to the 7,000 doctors in the Connecticut State Medical Society, with radio and print ads highlighting the medical benefits of marijuana, and showing that edibles and oils are steadily taking the place of smoking the plant's flowers.

With only 222 doctors participating, the program is still double the size it was last October, when the first of the state's six dispensaries began to supply marijuana from the four producers. It's a sign of steady progress, said Department of Consumer Protection Commissioner Jonathan Harris.

"It will be interesting to

see what our outreach efforts to the physicians are," Harris said. "It's a private sector model and it should be driven by the businesses, patients and doctors on the ground. It's a unique position as a regulator to

clear up the misinformation, tear down some of the barriers and give people some comfort that they're not going to get into any kind of trouble if they participate."

The radio spots are appearing on Hartford-area public radio. Harris has been making speaking appearances throughout the state to get the word on the 2012 law.

"We want to make people better-informed when and how to participate."

Fear of prosecution

Ken Ferrucci, senior vice president of policy and governmental affairs for the Connecticut State Medical Society, admits the organization has been cautious and didn't have an official reaction to the outreach by the Department of Consumer Protection.

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Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

Managing Partner David Lipton in a medical marijuana grow room at Advanced Grow Labs in West Haven.



By the numbers

4,097 registered patients in the medical marijuana program as of this month. Numbers by county:

Fairfield	981	New Haven	1,113	Tolland	147
Hartford	868	New London	357	Windham	145
Litchfield	272				

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"We've been consistent in our position," he said. "We did not support the bill originally and once it passed and became statute, we wanted to make certain physicians were free to participate without prosecution. The longer the program is in existence, the more willing physicians will participate, providing there is no legal action or enforcement. We have been supportive of education opportunities when we have been asked to provide medical information. We have circulated and do not try to prevent anyone from being educated on whether or not want to certify patients for the program."

Medical marijuana is still illegal under federal law, but the U.S. Justice Department has said it will not prosecute those who are complying with the laws in their state.

Harris said the longer the federal government leaves the medical-marijuana program alone, the more patients and doctors will feel comfortable enough to join. In the 2012 legislation, when the Connecticut General Assembly agreed to change marijuana's status from a dangerous Schedule I drug, with no medical benefits, to Schedule II, it challenged federal policy.

Expanding access

The agency plans for as many as three more dispensaries, particularly in lower Fairfield County and New Haven County, where half the state's medical cannabis patients live. There are no dispensaries in New Haven County and the only one in Fairfield County is in Bethel, an hour-long drive from Greenwich.

A regional organization of pro-marijuana physicians called Canna Care Does has opened an office in Hartford, with plans, according to its website, to open clinics Fairfield County and between New Haven and New London along Interstate 95.

"Depending on what the feds ultimately do, then you'll have the

lid totally take off," Harris said, who's optimistic about further growth. "It's a medical model and we're hearing more on the ground on the innovations in doseable forms."

David Lipton, the founder and CEO of Advanced Grow Labs in West Haven, is surprised that oils and edibles seem to be taking over the market, but he can understand why pharmacists in the dispensaries find it easier to suggest dosage amounts.

"You know that if you eat a cookie with 20 milligrams of THC, it's easier and more exact to medicate yourself rather than buying a flower with 25 percent THC and smoking it," Lipton said, noting a change in the kinds of products the dispensaries are asking for. "I believe that as more and more doctors are made aware that when they're recommending this their patients getting something formulated, they'll feel assured they're getting the right amount of medicine."

Products from Advanced Grow Labs and the other three growers have a variety of forms and potencies, including various balances in the psychoactive ingredient THC and other compounds called CBDs, which have been found to lessen the effect of seizures, among other benefits.

Angela D'Amico, co-founder of D&B Wellness, the Bethel dispensary, said she expected oils and edibles to come to the forefront, after 10 years of contact and experience with medical cannabis dispensaries and patients in California.

"Since we've gotten in the concentrated cannabis oil, with one-to-one ratios between THC and CBD, the oils have come to the top of our largest use," D'Amico said. "People are getting away from smoking loose flowers. They're using oils for e-cigarettes and concentrated cannabis oil delivered in syringes sublingually."

There are 11 ailments for which patients may be certified for use of medical cannabis and six more have been authorized for inclusion and are currently being reviewed for submission to the legislative Regulation



Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

Camille Kritzman, left, and Nicole Laluna remove stems from dried buds of medical marijuana in the packaging room at Advanced Grow Labs in West Haven.



H. John Voorhes III / Hearst Connecticut Media

Brian Tomasulo, of Newtown, a Compassionate Care Center of Connecticut customer, stands in the waiting room of the medical marijuana dispensary, on Thursday in Bethel. Tomasulo had chemotherapy and brain surgery and is now treating his cancer with medical marijuana.

Review Committee.

Smoke and oil

Brian Tomasulo, 34, of Newtown, said that when his personal

physician certified him last year, the only product available at the D&B Wellness Center was traditional marijuana flowers for smoking.

"Basically, as they brought out more products, the pharmacist suggested more direction," he said.

Diagnosed two years ago with testicular cancer that spread to his lymphatic system and lungs, after six months of chemotherapy and remission the cancer spread to his brain, causing seizures. He's back works part-time as a personal trainer.

Now, he mostly uses oils that he puts under his tongue, sublingually, for headaches, although he occasionally smokes cannabis for faster relief from pain including joint soreness. He uses strains of oil that have higher CBD levels in the morning and a higher THC percentage at night.

"My brain had been so inflamed, I had a hard time speaking," Tomasulo said. "I'm more clear-headed now."

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