



Authorizing Cannabis for Medical Purposes

The legalization of cannabis for recreational purposes came into effect with the *Cannabis Act* in October 2018, and patients continue to have access to cannabis for therapeutic purposes. The *Cannabis Regulations*¹ have replaced the *Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations*. Patients can obtain cannabis for medical purposes when a physician or nurse practitioner provides a “medical document”², authorizing its use, and determining the daily dried cannabis dose in grams.

With the authorization, patients have the choice whether to (a) buy directly from a federally licensed producer; (b) register with Health Canada to produce a limited amount for personal consumption; (c) designate someone to produce it for them; or (d) buy cannabis at provincial or territorial authorized retail outlets or online sales platforms, if above the legal age limit.

While acknowledging the unique requirements of patients suffering from a terminal illness or chronic disease for which conventional therapies have not been effective and for whom cannabis may provide relief, physicians remain concerned about the serious lack of clinical research, guidance and regulatory oversight for cannabis as a medical treatment. There is insufficient clinical information on safety and efficacy for most therapeutic claims. There is little information around therapeutic and toxic dosages and knowledge on interactions with medications. Besides the need for appropriate research, health practitioners would benefit from unbiased, accredited educational modules and decision support tools based on the best available evidence.

The Canadian Medical Association has consistently expressed concern with the role of gatekeeper that physicians have been asked to take as a result of court decisions. Physicians should not feel obligated to authorize cannabis for medical purposes.

Physicians who choose to authorize cannabis for their patients must comply with their provincial or territorial regulatory College's relevant guideline or policy. They should also be familiar with regulations and guidance, particularly:

- Health Canada's *Information for Health Care Practitioners – Medical Use of Cannabis* (monograph, summary and daily dose fact sheet),³
- the Canadian Medical Protective Association's guidance;⁴
- the College of Family Physicians of Canada's preliminary guidance *Authorizing Dried Cannabis for Chronic Pain or Anxiety*;⁵ and
- the *Simplified guideline for prescribing medical cannabinoids in primary care*, published in the *Canadian Family Physician*.⁶

The CMA recommends that physicians should:

- Ensure that there is no conflict of interest, such as direct or indirect economic interest in a licensed cannabis producer or be involved in dispensing cannabis;
- Treat the authorization as an insured service, similar to a prescription, and not charge patients or the licensed producer for this service;
- Until such time as there is compelling evidence of its efficacy and safety for specific indications, consider authorizing cannabis only after conventional therapies are proven ineffective in treating patients' conditions;
- Have the necessary clinical knowledge to authorize cannabis for medical purposes;
- Only authorize in the context of an established patient-physician relationship;
- Assess the patient's medical history, conduct a physical examination and assess for the risk of addiction and diversion, using available clinical support tools and tests;
- Engage in a consent discussion with patients which includes information about the known benefits and adverse health effects of cannabis in its various forms (e.g., edibles), including the risk of impairment to activities such as driving and work;
- Advise the patient regarding harm reduction strategies and the prevention of accidental exposure for children and other people;
- Document all consent discussions in patients' medical records;
- Reassess the patient on a regular basis for its effectiveness to address the medical condition for which cannabis was authorized, as well as for addiction and diversion, to support maintenance, adjustment or discontinuation of treatment; and
- Record the authorization of cannabis for medical purposes similar to when prescribing a controlled medication.

The *Cannabis Regulations* provide some consistency with many established provincial and territorial prescription monitoring programs for controlled substances. Licensed producers of cannabis for medical purposes are required to provide information to provincial and territorial medical licensing bodies upon request, including healthcare practitioner information, daily quantity of dried cannabis supported, period of use, date of document and basic patient information. The Minister of Health can also report physicians to their College should there be reasonable grounds that there has been a contravention of the *Narcotic Control Regulations* or the *Cannabis Regulations*.

Approved by CMA Board February 2015

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¹ Government of Canada. *Cannabis regulations*, SOR/2018-144, ss 264-353. Available: <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/SOR-2018-144/> (accessed 2019 Dec 2).

² Health Canada. *Medical document authorizing the use of cannabis for medical purposes*. Ottawa: Health Canada; 2019. Available: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/licensed-producers/sample-medical-document-marihuana-medical-purposes-regulations.html> (accessed 2019 Dec 2).

³ Health Canada. *Information for Health Care Practitioners – Medical Use of Cannabis Cannabis*. Ottawa: Health Canada; 2019. Available: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/information-medical-practitioners.html> (accessed 2019 Dec 2).

⁴ Canadian Medical Protective Association. *Medical cannabis: Considerations for Canadian doctors*. Ottawa: Health Canada; 2019. Available: <https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/browse-articles/2014/medical-marijuana-new-regulations-new-college-guidance-for-canadian-doctors> (accessed 2019 Dec 2).

⁵ College of Family Physicians of Canada. *Authorizing Dried Cannabis for Chronic Pain or Anxiety: Preliminary Guidance*. Ottawa: CFPC; 2019. Available: <http://www.cfpc.ca/uploadedFiles/Resources/PDFs/Authorizing%20Dried%20Cannabis%20for%20Chronic%20Pain%20or%20Anxiety.pdf>. (accessed 2019 Dec 2).

⁶ Allan GM, Ton JRDPJ, Beahm NP, et al. Simplified guideline for prescribing medical cannabinoids in primary care. *Cdn Fam Physician*. 2018 Feb 64: 111-120. Available: <https://www.cfp.ca/content/cfp/64/2/111.full.pdf> (accessed 2019 Dec 2).