



# accessing Marijuana

medical cannabis reaches the mainstream

story Sarah McGoldrick

According to *Statista* research agency, there are 342,103 registered medical marijuana clients in Canada. Though marijuana was legalised for public consumption in 2018, access to medical cannabis has been available since 1999 under certain provisions.

These restrictions were loosened in August of 2016, allowing individuals with a medical need, and who have the authorization of their health care practitioner, to be able to access cannabis in three ways: continue to access quality-

controlled cannabis by registering with licensed producers, register with *Health Canada* to produce a limited amount for their own medical purposes, or they can designate someone else to produce it for them.

As Canadians become more accepting of cannabis as a medical treatment the number of medical marijuana practitioners and outlets continues to grow. *CannaWay Clinics* (Mississauga location) has been helping individuals address their medical concerns for several years. The

company was founded by a group of physicians, counsellors, and experts in medicinal cannabis.

Dr. Stephen Glazer has been a proprietor of alternative medical treatments for more than 30 years. He is Board Certified in Internal Medicine, Critical Care Medicine and Obesity Medicine as well as a specialist in Sleep Disorders. He is a member of the Ontario Bariatric Network and serves as Vice President of the Canadian Association of Bariatric Physicians and Surgeons. He believes medical marijuana should be explored for patients looking to expand their treatment options.

“Cannabis has been used as a medical agent for much longer than many medications we have available today. The body of science that supports the chemical composition and structure of its mechanism of action is growing. When combined with a physician’s supervision and knowledge, we’re able to create a comprehensive health plan that includes cannabis in consideration of other medications,” he said, adding that “research about the healing components of CBD is the primary component of healing” (for its anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects).

### The Entourage Effect

He noted THC has shown some medical benefits as well. However, the ‘entourage effect’ is a theory that states certain cannabinoids will have a different or synergistic effect on the body when consumed together.

“Unfortunately, the entourage effect and individual cannabinoids have not been thoroughly explored yet. Our hope is that as more research becomes available, we will be able to even better help our patients,” he said.

When comparing medical cannabis to a traditional pharmaceutical, Glazer believes the industry has evolved to a point where it is manufactured in a very similar way, under the regulatory controls of *Health Canada*. This helps to ensure the quality and consistency of the product.

He believes continued research and understanding of the benefits of medical marijuana treatment will lead to a decrease in suffering for patients.

“Some common ailments that cannabis is used for include: chronic pain, arthritis, cancer-related pain, fibromyalgia, mood disorders, childhood epilepsy (where cannabis has been proven to help), multiple sclerosis, insomnia, Crohn’s disease, and much more,” he said. “There are several positive medical implications of using cannabis, including pain relief, sleep aid, and relaxation. These are the effects that many are seeking when they try the medication.”

He added that patients and doctors must discuss the potential risks involved with using medical marijuana. Like traditional prescription drugs, there is a risk for side effects and interactions.

“Patients should also consider some of the risks such as unpredictable drug interactions from medications they are already using, or potential mental health complications such as anxiety or memory issues,” he said. “It’s important for patients to put their health in the hands of a qualified professional, and this holds true when looking for cannabis treatment. They should ensure their physician has a track record of experience with comprehensive cannabis treatment plans, and that they provide all the information necessary such as current medications so that any possible drug interactions can be considered.”

“The risks of addiction are significantly lower than that of other pharmaceuticals such as opioids and illegal drugs, however, physical and psychological habituation is a factor to consider,” he said adding *Health Canada* recommends not to consume cannabis under the age of 25 due to the brain’s stage of development.

He noted there are some exceptions where medical marijuana may be an option outside the traditional guidelines. “An example of an extenuating circumstance would be a child having a very high number of seizures a day (potentially hundreds), or someone who is terminally ill,” he said.

### Finding Relief

Catherine Parr, 65 of Milton first began experiencing chronic pain more than 30 years ago as a result of a car accident. Today, she also deals with the pain of fibromyalgia and arthritis.

She said regular prescription taking had left her dealing with ongoing side effects such as stomach pain and having to deal with the reactions of coming off them when they no longer worked.

“It was unnatural and the chemicals are not conducive for long term use,” she said. Finding no lasting relief with traditional medicine, she sought out treatment through medical marijuana. Not finding success in her first attempt due to a lack of adequate support and knowledge from the clinic, she tried again at the *CannaWay Clinic*.

“At *CannaWay*, it was a different experience, the key was education,” she said. She was prescribed a cannabis oil administered by syringe under the tongue. She said the results have far exceeded what she experienced taking traditional prescription drugs.

“There is absolutely no high associated with medicinal marijuana. It’s a natural product and you are not creating havoc with other parts of your body,” she said. She added the stigma associated with medical marijuana continues to lessen with education and public acceptance. She said she hopes this will encourage more people to seek treatment through alternative means.

“We don’t have to whisper in corners. That’s really import-



(L-R) Heather Taylor Registered Practical Nurse (RPN) Cannabis Counselor, Latoya Phillips Cannabis Counselor, Neela Williams Assistant Operations Manager

ant to the process of demystifying medical and recreational use,” she said adding all the press attention has helped raise awareness and encouraged people to ask questions. “It is now more socially and medically acceptable. I encourage anyone who is suffering from pain, sleep problems or depression to go that route.”

Parr hopes that the added awareness and demand will also help drive down the cost of medical marijuana treatments. She noted most medical insurance will not cover it at this time, but there are opportunities to apply to the manufacturers for a subsidy or a reduction in price.

“A little goes a long way. A vial will last a long time. It’s cost-effective but not less expensive,” she said.

Like any medical treatment, Parr noted that results may not happen the first time. She said her journey required her to explore more than one clinic, but she is now happy with her results. “I encourage people who have a negative experience not to give up and to try other clinics. Don’t stick with what doesn’t work.

Under the new medical marijuana Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR) guidelines, patients are now allowed to grow a limited amount for themselves or designate someone to grow it on their behalf.

Dr. Glazer says access to medical marijuana should continue to become easier as governments and the public develop a better understanding of the benefits.

He added it is also important for anyone seeking medical marijuana to understand what constitutes a legal dispensary. He said it is important to note that a dispensary (any operation, legal or illegal) that sells cannabis is not a medical clinic. Medical cannabis prescribed by a physician can only be obtained online from a licensed producer’s website. Patients must register with these websites and provide their medical prescription before they are able to make a purchase.

He noted recreational cannabis can be obtained by someone seeking medical cannabis, however, their team does not condone the use of recreational cannabis.

He added patients must take the time to understand their condition and understand their treatment options.

“Everyone is different, and there are many anecdotal stories of people claiming cannabis has cured people of diseases or sickness they were struggling with for years, but this is not yet scientifically proven. As of now, we prescribe cannabis to help manage symptoms, and not as a cure,” he said. 