

Medicinal marijuana users in Canada must carry identification cards

Users and growers of medicinal marijuana will be given photo identification cards to prevent police harassment under new Canadian regulations unveiled on July 4 by federal Health minister Allan Rock.

However users will only be entitled to possess a maximum 30-day supply of the drug, as determined by the daily dosage prescribed by their physicians. The identification cards will only carry basic information about possession and production limits, the regulations state. "No personal medical information will be indicated on the card."

The regulations spell out three categories of eligibility: people with less than 12 months to live because of a terminal illness; people with specific symptoms associated with multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury, spinal cord disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS, severe arthritis or epilepsy; and people with other diseases for whom conventional therapy has been ineffective, provided they have first obtained the approval of two medical specialists.

Doctors will not be obliged to make applications on behalf of patients. But they will have to



Steady support for medicinal users

approve the use of marijuana by the patient, who will be required to apply for a permit from the state health authorities.

Getting a doctor's approval may prove problematic given that the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) is predicting that physicians will be reluctant to participate in the process because of the lack of credible scientific evidence supporting the use of medicinal marijuana, its unknown side-effects, and concerns

about unregulated supply of the drug.

The new regulations also allow people to grow their own marijuana or designate someone to grow it for them on a non-commercial basis. But buying marijuana seeds will remain an illegal act and doctors say they will have no way of knowing what grade or quality of marijuana their patients will be using.

"It is premature for Health Canada to expand broadly the medicinal use of marijuana before there is adequate scientific support", said the CMA's former president Hugh Scully. Physicians are placed in an "untenable" position because they must counsel patients on the risks and benefits of using marijuana despite the inconclusive scientific evidence, he added. But Rock is hopeful that conclusive data about the benefits of medical marijuana's will emerge from a Can\$7.5-million, 5-year research programme, to study the efficacy of marijuana in the treatment of wasting syndrome in HIV/AIDS patients.

Wayne Kondro

Legionnaire's outbreak in Spanish town may be largest ever

The largest reported outbreak of Legionnaire's disease struck last week in Murcia, Spain. Investigators have traced the source of the infection to refrigeration towers in several buildings in the downtown neighbourhood of Santa María de Gracia but the investigation is ongoing.

It seems that the outbreak started on June 28 and infected patients started reporting to local hospitals from July 7. By July 15, 745 patients had been admitted to hospital with suspected community-acquired pneumonia caused by *Legionella pneumophila* serogroup 1. The infection has now been microbiologically confirmed in 310 patients. Two patients have died from the infection and 12 patients have been in intensive care units. The outbreak has affected patients aged from 19-84 years old. Most patients are old and have a chronic disease.

Francisco Marqués, head of the Department of Health of Murcia's regional government, said the number of cases increased so rapidly the department had to form a crisis cabinet to tackle the outbreak. The cabinet set up a epidemiological survey of infected people and an

investigation of refrigeration towers, public fountains, and other water supply systems in the city.

The state's civil protection security forces flew over the affected area and took photographs of facilities and buildings that were suspected of being the source of the infection. The Ministry of Health also authorised a 25% increase in resources for Murcia's hospitals.

Marqués pointed out that water samples taken from 14 refrigeration towers in six large buildings in the downtown area had yielded legionella. Genetic analyses and molecular typing of isolates recovered from these towers were being done to see whether they matched strains isolated from patients.

The suspected buildings include a shopping centre, the department of health, the department of farming, water, and environment, and a bank. Marqués said that all refrigeration towers suspected of harbouring legionella were being disinfected and public fountains have been closed. Investigators have said the number of cases being reported has slowed down since last weekend.

The town will host the sixth

Olympics games of European young people from July 22-26 and more than 3000 people, including 2500 participants from 48 countries, are expected to attend the event. Public health experts from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) travelled to Murcia last week to assess the situation.

The team reported to a meeting of the Association of European Olympic Committees in Moscow on July 15, which was led by Jacques Rogge, the new IOC president. The IOC team has recommended that during the event, the town's refrigeration towers must be reviewed and disinfected every day. All public fountains and irrigation systems must be closed during the event.

Rafael González, a spokesman for the health commission of the socialist party of Murcia's regional government said that the commission will ensure that IOC's recommendations are fulfilled. He said that his party will also demand that any tower that has not been disinfected must be closed. The Superior Court of Murcia has also started a public health inquiry into the outbreak.

Xavier Bosch