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Physician Input Needed as State's Medical Marijuana Industry Gets Underway

It's taken a long time for medical marijuana to finally reach patients in Florida, but in late August, one of the first deliveries of low-THC cannabis was delivered to a person suffering from epilepsy in Shalimar. Despite this, a longtime sponsor of the bill authorizing the use of the drug, which can currently only be used by a very specific set of patients, says that there is still much work to be done.

✖ "There is a lot of confusion out there; not just with patients, but with members of the medical community,"

explained Rep. Katie A. Edwards (D-Plantation). “This process has gone through a lot of changes, and it’s made it difficult for healthcare providers to know exactly where things stand—some think that our Florida law is like those in Colorado or California, and it’s not like that at all. We took a very different approach.”

One of the most striking differences, according to Rep. Edwards, is that the Florida law takes a medical and science-based approach to the cultivation and dispensation of medical cannabis. “It was important to us that individuals know what they’re ingesting – that to the best extent, the product be kept as sterile as it can be, which is critical when you’re giving it to people who are already in fragile conditions.”

Florida’s Compassionate Medical Cannabis Act of 2014 was designed to help patients who suffer from epilepsy, seizure disorders or certain cancers. In a later legislative session, medical cannabis was added to the state’s Right to Try Act, which allows terminally ill patients access to experimental drugs not approved for general use. This coming November, Amendment Two on the Florida ballot, if passed, will broaden medical cannabis usage to those with debilitating medical conditions as certified by licensed physicians.

As part of the original bill, companies who are licensed to grow, process and dispense medical cannabis must meet special requirements, including having a plant nursery that has been in business for at least 30 years. “We wanted these licenses to go to plant nurseries because they are used to growing plants in a highly regulated environment, and know how to prevent mold, pests and plant diseases,” said Rep. Edwards, citing concerns for end-user health.

Patients must be enrolled in the Florida Department of Health’s Office of Compassionate Care program and have a written order from a physician in order to receive medical cannabis. “Medical directors at the dispensaries will be working with pharmacologists to review what treatments and medications the patient has used previously in order to find the right dosage for the patient,” said Rep. Edwards.

“Information will be compiled by the Florida College of Pharmacy, and their reports will be provided to lawmakers so that we can gather more than anecdotal evidence about the use of medical marijuana – to see, for example, if it helps to decrease the number of seizures a person has, or if they are able to stop taking or reduce their reliance on other pharmaceuticals.”

Research and development is key to the use of medical cannabis, according to Rep. Edwards, who has been frustrated by the restrictions put on those trying to learn more. “My goal is to generate interest in the field of medical cannabis research and development nationwide, and to convince the federal government to increase access to cannabis for medical research,” she said, noting that the federal government’s marijuana farm at the University of Mississippi is the only legal source of cannabis for scientists who wish to study it.

“Unfortunately, universities have not gotten involved because of money – they can’t risk federal grant funding to study a product that is still illegal under federal laws,” she added. “When they do a cost/benefit analysis, they still see it as too much risk.”

Some physicians have been slow to embrace the law as well, partly because of its delay due to numerous legal challenges, and possibly because it requires them to take an eight-hour course in order to receive the continuing medical education (CME) required by the Florida Medical Association and Florida Osteopathic Medical Association.

“If physicians need more information or have questions, they can contact the Office of Compassionate Care at (850) 245-4444,” said Rep. Edwards, adding that hospice providers wondering about the Right to Try Act can contact her office. “I’m also always willing to come to physician roundtables to explain the law, as well as to take input from doctors who have concerns. We need to bring physicians together with medical directors and dispensing organizations to engage, and to talk about what is happening in Florida and how it will

affect patients.”

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