

## Ottawa Journal by David Tilson MP ? Liberal government makes changes to medical marijuana for veterans

Canada's Veterans have proudly served our country and deserve the utmost respect and support for their service. Their loyal and faithful service to Canada often comes at a tremendous price, such as pain resulting from injuries during their service and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Medical marijuana is sometimes used to treat such medical conditions, which Veterans Affairs Canada has paid for since 2008. However, a recent announcement made by the current Veterans Affairs minister raises concerns about how a new Veterans Affairs Canada policy regarding medical marijuana will affect how veterans can find relief from pain and PTSD symptoms.

Kent Hehr, minister of Veterans Affairs and associate minister of National Defence, announced Nov. 22 a new departmental policy regarding medical marijuana. The new policy sets a fixed rate of \$8.50 per gram and reduces the daily amount of dried marijuana sold by licensed producers or the equivalent value in fresh marijuana or cannabis oil for which veterans will be reimbursed from 10 grams to three grams, effective May 21, 2017. The Minister also announced that in order to be reimbursed for more, a specialist (i.e. a psychiatrist, pain specialist, oncologist) will be required to submit a rationale explaining why more than three grams per day is necessary to treat the veteran's condition.

In 2008, Veterans Affairs Canada began to pay for marijuana for medical purposes, sold by Health Canada for \$5 per gram, as part of its drug benefits program, with no established limit on the amount covered. Later in 2014, Veterans Affairs Canada established a limit (10 grams per day) on the number of grams of marijuana for medical purposes that the department would cover for eligible veterans. However, Health Canada has indicated that more than five grams per day may increase risks with respect to the drug's effect on the cardiovascular, pulmonary and immune systems, and on psychomotor performance, and may increase the risk of drug dependence.

The Canadian Medical Association has expressed concerns about the "serious lack of clinical research, guidance and regulatory oversight for marijuana as a treatment." The Conservative Party of Canada does not endorse the use of marijuana, but the courts have required reasonable access to a legal source of marijuana when authorized by a physician. We, the Conservative Official Opposition, believe that decisions regarding treatment should be made by veterans in consultation with their doctors, not by government bureaucrats. The changes recently announced by Minister Hehr will affect how veterans can find relief from pain and PTSD symptoms. The Minister needs to start listening to veterans before making decisions that have a considerable impact on their well-being and quality of life. It's also concerning that the Minister has chosen to take action on an item that isn't in his mandate letter when he has only acted on two out of 23 action items to date.

Veterans should always receive the support they need from their government. The current Liberal government's recent announcement of a new departmental policy regarding medical marijuana demonstrates it isn't listening to veterans before making decisions that directly impact them. Our country's finest deserve better.

