

# Canada getting out of medical marijuana business

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Canada's Conservative government will soon stop producing and distributing medical marijuana, leaving it up to the private sector in a policy change that angered critics on Monday.

Canada's [Health Minister](#) Leona Aglukkaq made the announcement on Sunday, claiming current regulations "have left the system open to abuse."

"We have heard real concerns from law enforcement, fire officials, and municipalities about how people are hiding behind these rules to conduct [illegal activity](#), and putting health and safety of Canadians at risk," the minister said.

"These changes will make it far more difficult for people to game the system."

Aglukkaq said Ottawa would no longer produce and distribute marijuana for medical purposes. Instead, companies will be licenced to grow and sell the product at market rates.

Patients with a prescription from a doctor starting in March 2013 will be allowed to purchase a variety of strains of marijuana from licensed producers, who will set prices.

Also individuals will no longer be permitted to grow marijuana in their homes for their own personal use, said Aglukkaq.

Police and fire officials claimed that home grow operations are at "risk of abuse and exploitation by criminal elements" and one in 22 catch fire, and so they applauded the move.

Doctors however complained that they are being asked to write prescriptions for a substance that has not been clinically tested. Some risks such as [lung disease](#) from smoking it or psychosis are known, while the benefits are only anecdotal, including relief from nausea and pain.

And they said they are now being asked to be the sole gatekeepers of the program, accusing the government of abdicating its responsibility.

"It's the equivalent of asking doctors to prescribe while blindfolded," Canadian Medical Association president Anna Reid told the daily Globe and Mail.

Marijuana activists and opposition MPs meanwhile stepped up calls for both medical and recreational use of marijuana to be decriminalized, after two US states last month voted to legalize pot.

The Medical Cannabis Access Society, a Montreal-based [medical marijuana](#) dispensary, commented that "creating a commercial marketplace is ostensibly progressive."

"We are witnessing the convergence of a flowering social justice movement with an emergent commercial sector. It's going to be a bumpy ride," it said in a statement.

However the group added, "For many patients who grow their own, this is one step forward and two steps back."

Some 26,000 Canadians are authorized to use marijuana for medical purposes, up from 500 a decade ago, according to government figures.

As many as one million Canadians are believed to smoke it regularly for recreation, say polls.

Canada's health department currently sells marijuana for Can\$5 per gram, which it says is heavily subsidized by taxpayers. The street value can be as many as three times more.

Some patients have said the government stash is weak and so turned to growing it themselves.

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