

Uruguay pharmacies start selling marijuana (Update)

July 19 2017

Pharmacies in Uruguay started selling marijuana Wednesday under a four-year-old law that has made the small South American country the first in the world to legalize pot from production to sale.

At a pharmacy in Montevideo's Old Town, five customers were waiting to buy when the store shutters went up at the start of the day, and lines grew longer as the day went on.

"I've been smoking since I was 14. Let's give it a try," said a 37-year-old man who would not give his name.

"It's funny," a pharmacy employee told AFP on grounds of anonymity. "In two hours we filled only three prescriptions, but 30 people came to buy marijuana."

Some pharmacies saw as many as 20 people lining up to make their first legal pot purchase.

"We did not expect this kind of movement," said Sebastian Scafo, 33, a pharmacy manager.

In all, 16 pharmacies have been authorized to sell marijuana under state controls, barely enough to cover a country of 3.5 million people.

No major pharmacy chain has agreed to sell the drug.

Many pharmacies have been unwilling to participate in the scheme because of concerns about security and doubts that the small market of registered users is worth the trouble.

Only about 5,000 people, most of them age 30 to 44, have signed up as prospective buyers since Uruguay's state registry opened in early May.

Walk-in sales are not allowed under the law, and only residents of Uruguay can register to buy pot—thereby preventing marijuana tourism.

Blow to drug-dealers?

Among those trying the new legal distribution system was Xavier Ferreyra, a 32-year-old city employee, who was making his first purchase at a pharmacy in Montevideo's Old Town.

He said he saw two main advantages to the new approach: "safety and the quality" of the drug, adding, "I no longer have to go buy it in some slum."

Pharmacy sales are the last of three phases set out under the 2013 law.

Under the early phases, nearly 7,000 people registered to grow weed at home, and more than 60 smokers' clubs were authorized.

Only two companies were authorized to produce marijuana for pharmacies—under military protection, and with no public access.

The state Institute for the Regulation and Control of Cannabis (IRCC) has authorized the sale of two types of marijuana, to be sold in five-gram packets.

On Monday, the National Drugs Council tweeted an image of what the

packages would look like: blue-and-white sealed sachets that look something like condom packets.

An "Alfa I" package contains "Alfa I variety cannabis hybrid with Indica predominant."

Another sort has "Beta I variety cannabis" with Sativa. The levels of THC—the psychotropic constituent in cannabis—are given on the outside, for consumer information.

The packets also bear a "Warnings" section about the risks of consuming marijuana and recommendations on how to do it more safely.

'A marvelous plant'

The buyers who talked to AFP reporters all said they had bought 10 grams of pot, a packet of each variety on sale.

The packets are being retailed at \$6.60 each, according to the IRCCA.

Customers are identified through a digital fingerprint reader, which allows them to buy without having to show other forms of identification in the store.

Uruguay's goal in legalizing the sale of marijuana for recreational use is to cut down on illegal smuggling.

Camila Berro, a 24-year-old business student, walked out of a pharmacy smiling, two packets of pot in hand.

"I feel very lucky to be able to get it legally," she said. "I have friends in other countries who were imprisoned for smoking a joint."

To Ferreyra, the municipal worker, "Uruguay has taken a very big step... I hope one day they can legalize a lot more drugs."

And former President Jose Mujica, who enacted the marijuana reforms while in office from 2010 to 2015, said that while "no addiction is good," it was "horrible to condemn a marvelous plant."

Uruguay, he added, is "trying a new path."

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