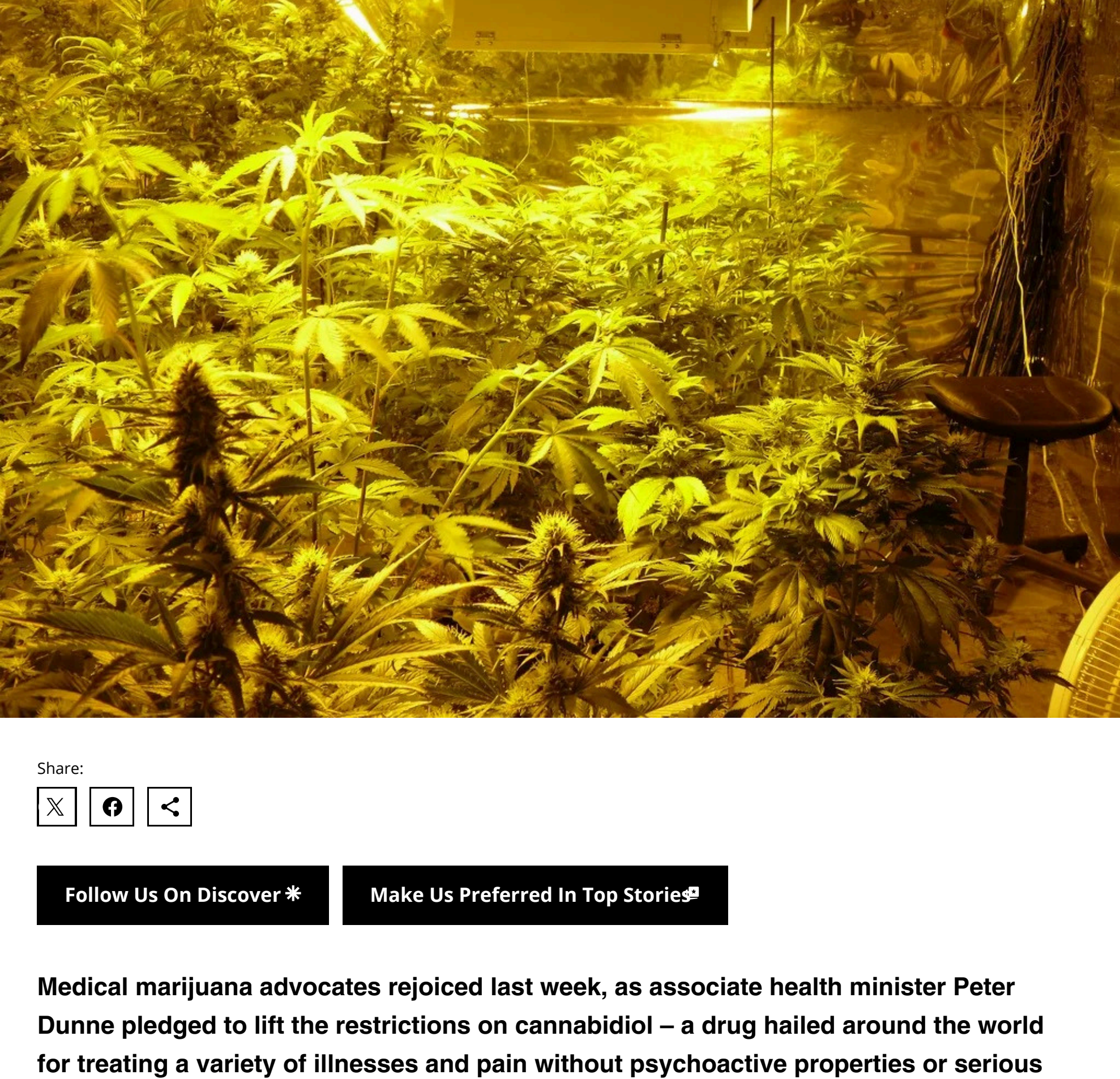


Health

Do New Zealand’s New Medical Marijuana Rules Actually Help Sick People?

By Sasha Borissenko June 7, 2017, 9:36pm



Medical marijuana advocates rejoiced last week, as associate health minister Peter Dunne pledged to lift the restrictions on cannabidiol – a drug hailed around the world for treating a variety of illnesses and pain without psychoactive properties or serious side-effects.

It’s been a long time coming; around 80 percent of New Zealanders said marijuana should be decriminalised for pain relief in a study last year.

The new regime allows doctors to prescribe the drug, where patients previously had to get special approval from the Ministry of Health. It also reduces import controls for prescribers and wholesalers. But despite the restrictions slowly lifting, the new regime doesn’t subsidise the drug, and patients prescribed cannabidoil [CBD] are faced with limited supply and a bill of around \$1400 a month.

“It’s going to be at least two months before he can write me a script, and even then, there’s no supply in New Zealand”

Karen* told VICE she was giddy after last week’s news. Having had five failed back surgeries as a result of chronic nerve pain and bone generation in her spine, she’s been a CBD advocate for years.

“Even when I’m doped [on traditional prescription painkillers] up the only time I feel relatively normal is when I’m horizontal. That’s of little use if you have two kids.”

This week she went to her GP hoping to get a prescription, but he didn’t know about the changes and had little knowledge of the area.

“After a quick google, he told me that’s it’s going to be at least two months before he can write me a script, and even then, there’s no supply in New Zealand so he’d have no idea what to write on the prescription. Say I were to get one, I’d then walk down to the pharmacy and they’d have no idea what to do.”

NZD\$65 later, Karen walked out of the doctor’s office without a script. In the meantime she’s been accessing CBD illegally, which sits uncomfortably with her.

“After 16 years of following the rules and doing what I was told, I needed to be my own advocate and for my own state of mind. I’d tried everything. And I don’t want a product that’s grown in the back shed, I want something that’s of a high medicinal quality.”

And when she can’t import CBD, she consumes a mixture of 17 prescribed medications, which are highly addictive and the side effects are so awful that they’re destroying her body, she says.

“Importing illegally is the lesser of two evils, I don’t want to be so drugged up to my eyeballs that I can’t function in society. But because I’m a mother I want to be a law-abiding citizen. I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.”

Jack* was diagnosed with a form of arthritis where his immune system attacks his body two years ago. Until his diagnosis, he’d been suffering for 15 years. He’s unable to work, which he hates, and says he’s tired of the debilitating pain. “My body gets so stiff and tight that I can’t sleep a wink. Some days it will be tolerable, others, I’ll be up for an hour and bang, I’m out for the rest of the week.”

He gets a pain-relieving injection once a week, and each day he’ll wake up, take up to six anti-inflammatory pills, six tablets of tramadol, two hits of codeine and a sleeping pill to try and get some sleep. He takes a number of anti-nausea pills too to combat the side effects of the opiates.

“I hate the drugs I take. I walk around like a wasted unit, nothing takes the pain away and the nausea makes me feel like I’m going to spew all the time.”

The cocktail of drugs affects his body so much that he’ll try and detox once a week for three days or so.

During these days he’ll juice some cannabis that he grows in his back garden. “I’m not into getting stoned or high. I’m not a stoner, the trick is to juice the plant to make CBD so you don’t get high. It’s the only time my body starts to relax and it relieves me 75 percent of my symptoms.”

“Being able to get a prescription means jack if it’s still going to cost an arm and a leg. The worry over the cost is still a big drama.

Growing the plant illegally for personal use has come at a cost as he’s been convicted four times. But he says because there’s little access to legal CBD, given he’d have to pay \$1400 per month to get it, he’s willing to take the risk.

“Being able to get a prescription means jack if it’s still going to cost an arm and a leg. The worry over the cost is still a big drama.

“I have sheep, I grow organic vegetables for the community. The police know it’s an easy bust. They’ve never found any scales, any bags, any money or anything that would imply I sell the stuff. I don’t go down to the pub and hassle or assault people. I don’t drink drive. I grow CBD because my body is all out of whack.”

“People shouldn’t have to get so bad to access medication that’s said to work. People grow their own CBD or import it illegally out of sheer desperation.”

Auckland-based Molly Kelsey was first diagnosed with epilepsy when she was 19. She was in the USA at the time, sitting outside the Harry Potter theme park in Florida, when she had her first seizure. She blacked out and woke up in a hospital. She’s now 24 and has been seizure- free for five months, but at her worst she was suffering up to 20 seizures a day.

She had to leave her job as a vet nurse as “a nurse seizing on the floor has little purpose,” she says. She hasn’t driven for five years, and she’s now studying business part time, and working part-time as an accounts person for an optometrist.

Because of the condition, she’s had a snowball of illnesses including chronic pain disorder, complex regional pain syndrome, and chronic fatigue syndrome. She takes 20 pills a day for her illnesses and she’s an advocate for CBD because she’s sick of the side effects of her medication, which include drowsiness, shakes, nausea, lowered blood pressure, sensitivity to light, and chronic insomnia.

When you had to go through the Ministry of Health for CBD, Molly’s doctor said she wouldn’t qualify.

“My neurologist told me my seizures weren’t frequent or violent enough so I shouldn’t bother applying. But although I’ve never tried it I’d really like to be on something that’s natural, that’s got fewer side effects. I’m on so many medications if I could get off one, that would be amazing.

“People shouldn’t have to get so bad to access medication that’s said to work. People grow their own CBD or import it illegally out of sheer desperation.”

“I would have valued attainable access to CBD at that time because normal cannabis had the added effect of making me feel high, which was not what I wanted.”

Mother of one Tanya Hackney was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer last September. After surgery, six rounds of chemotherapy, and three weeks of radiotherapy, she’s been given the official all-clear.

“Chemotherapy is strange. You know you’re poisoning your body but you’ve chosen it so you’re making lemonade out of lemons. I was positive, but the experience was hellish,” she says.

Even after the treatment, she’s unable to eat, sleep, and often feels nauseous. Like Molly, Tanya’s never tried CBD but having managed to access cannabis a few times, the effect was profound, she says.

“I would have valued attainable access to CBD at that time because normal cannabis had the added effect of making me feel high, which was not what I wanted as this was a very scary episode of my life.”

Lawyer Sue Grey has represented Jack for cultivating cannabis. She’s also disputed the legality of CBD, saying that because CBD lacks the psychoactive substance THC, it falls outside the Misuse of Drugs Act. This would mean the government was illegally restricting CBD use prior to last week’s announcement, and Sue threatened to take the government to court over it.

“Allowing prescriptions is a step in the right direction, but it’s a very slow process and it’s extremely frustrating that the government has taken so long despite the official advice from experts, and immense public pressure.”

Sue says that if the red tape continues around getting the drugs into the country, she’s ultimately willing to do another legal challenge to clear away some of the road blocks.

“Sick people have been suffering and unable to access affordable, safe medical care. The situation is the same as it was before.”

**names changed on request*