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Hawaii State Department of Health's Medical Marijuana Online Registry Accelerates Access for Hawaii's Patients

The Hawaii Department of Health's medical marijuana registry program is now able to issue patient registration cards in a fraction of the time it took to process a year ago.

With the introduction of a new online registry, it now takes three to five business days for the department to issue medical marijuana registration cards to patients -- a dramatic decrease from the six to eight weeks it previously took when there was a backlog of patients last year.

"Without compromising the integrity of our review process or the safety of Hawaii's people, we brought everything up to speed and improved our processing time so that patients can receive their registration cards faster," said Scottina Ruis, medical marijuana registry program coordinator for the Hawaii Department of Health.

Process Improvements

Ruis noted that some of the benefits of the new online registry system are having the physician certify the patients electronically and having the registration cards sent directly to patients. In the past, when the Department of Health issued registration cards, the cards were mailed to the certifying physicians for their signature then the certifying physician would give or mail the cards to their patients. The use of the physician's electronic signature during the registration process allows the Department of Health to send the registration cards directly to the patients. Since the program requires that patients wait until they receive their registration card before they are authorized to use medical marijuana, the sooner they receive their card, the sooner they are protected by the program.

"Both patients and their physicians play a critical role in ensuring that registration cards can be issued promptly," Ruis said. "Patients must make sure they complete the electronic registration form properly and submit all of the required documentation to their physician, electronically. Physicians must review the electronic registration form as well as electronically certify the patient's condition before submitting the completed application to the Department

of Health.”

The patient registration card includes information on the grow site which permits a qualifying patient or care giver to grow up to seven plants, which must be properly tagged in order to remain in compliance with the program. Inappropriately registered grow sites, unregistered grow sites and improperly tagged plants are not protected by the program and are subject to confiscation by law enforcement agencies.

Background

When oversight of the medical marijuana registry program was transferred from the Department of Public Safety to the Department of Health a little more than a year ago, there was a total of 11,402 unduplicated, registered patients in the program. That number steadily climbed in 2015, and today has reached more than 13,000 valid patients.

Anticipating Future Community Need

“With the dispensary program targeted to be in operation as early as July 2016, medical marijuana will be more accessible. The online registration process is the first step to help ensure that we are ready for any increase in demand for registration cards,” Ruis said.

“To be optimally functional, better able to service existing and new patients, physicians, law enforcement, and to be responsive to the larger community, we need additional staff. We hope to receive funding for an additional staff in the next fiscal year, which begins in July 2016. This will help ensure that we are able to maintain this positive momentum and the timing would coincide with the targeted launch of the medical marijuana dispensary program when demand for cards could potentially increase,” Ruis said.

Importance of Physician Education

In the meantime, Ruis is looking at ways to enlist the support of more certifying physicians for the registration program. The Department of Health recommends that patients who feel they may be eligible for the program begin the discussion with the physician that is currently treating them for the debilitating medical condition for which they are seeking certification. Ideally these physicians would seek continuing medical education courses specific to medical marijuana and how to best meet patient needs. “Education is a critical component of the medical marijuana program. We hope to be actively involved at all levels – physicians, health care professionals, patients and caregivers, law enforcement, and the general public,” Ruis said.

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