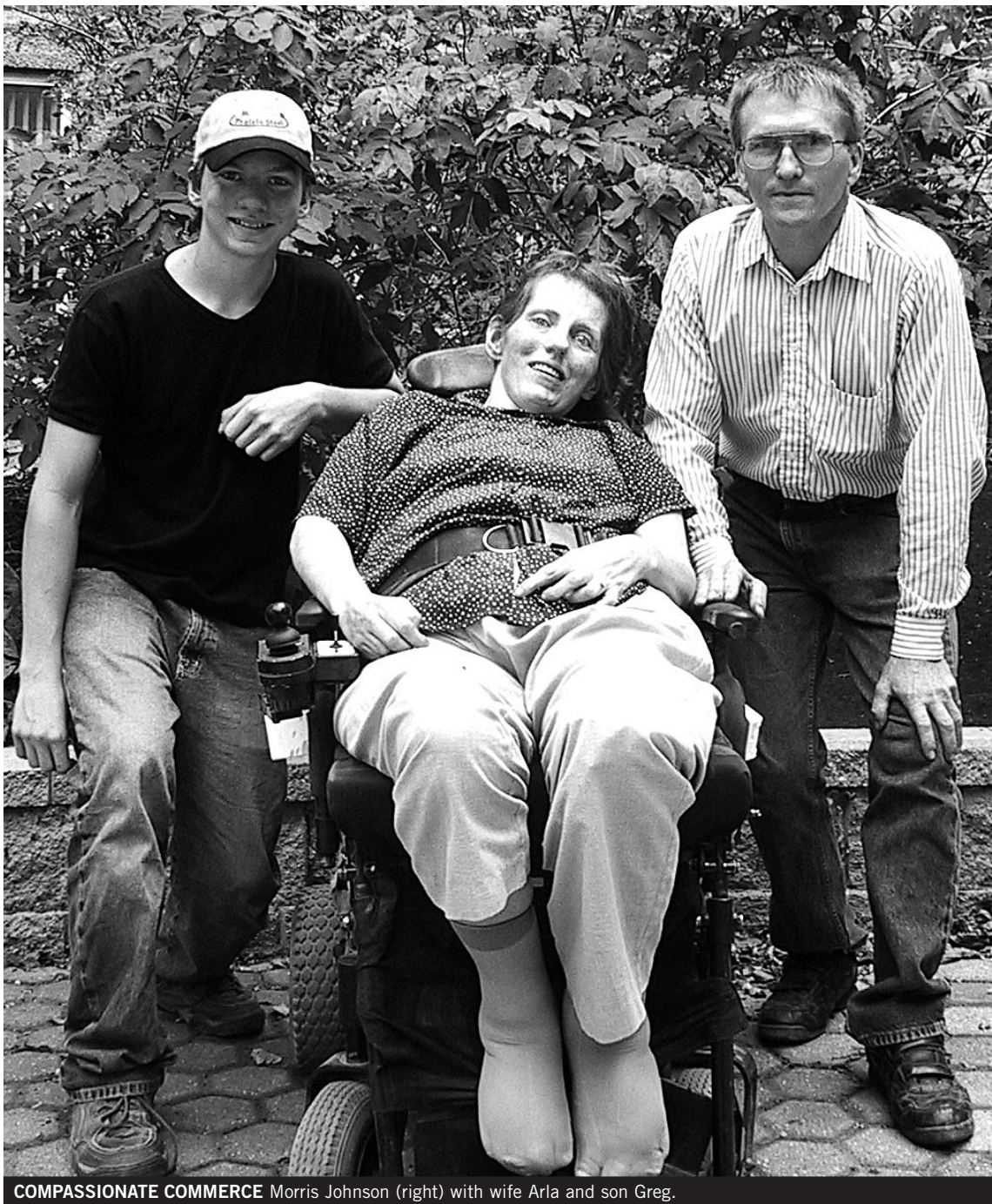


# newswatch



COMPASSIONATE COMMERCE Morris Johnson (right) with wife Arla and son Greg.

## BUDDING BUSINESS

### Cannabis Condo wants to take medical marijuana to the next level — a legitimate business

by Carrie-May Siggins

Morris Johnson has seen the future of medical marijuana — and its name is “condo”.

Johnson, a Saskatchewan farmer with a business background in the nutraceutical industry, plans to open a “cannabis condo”, where Canadians with a license to grow medical marijuana can rent one-square-metre plots for \$3,000 a year. The complex would be housed in a former schoolhouse on his land near Bovine, Saskatchewan.

So far Johnson has one client, his wife, Arla, who suffers from severe multiple sclerosis. But he says over 20 people have expressed interest in his idea.

Johnson says that his condo is a logical next step for a country that, with the help of the courts, is overcoming its prejudice against the use

of marijuana, the most popular of illegal narcotics, for medical purposes. Advocates of medical marijuana say it has a legitimate role in health care, with a range of potential uses including controlling chronic pain and nausea and even preventing seizures. Pot won't cure a disease, but it will make management of that disease easier.

Unfortunately, says Johnson, those who want to use cannabis as medicine are faced with the challenge of navigating a new and unwieldy bureaucratic apparatus. Canada's Medical Marijuana Access Regulations (MMAR) “were not designed specifically to create access,” he says. “They were designed to [give the government] total control over production and distribution.”

Johnson wants to give the govern-

ment a helping hand. He says medical marijuana isn't a one-size-fits-all kind of product, as the feds seem to view it. There are many breeds of the plant, he says, and some are more suitable for treating some illnesses than others. His cannabis condo concept will give his clients more control over the marijuana they're using for their own health needs by giving them access to experts who understand the nuances of the plant and will be able to answer their questions. By growing the plants in an environment where the client has more control, he says, “they won't have to go out onto the street and buy whatever is available.”

#### GROWTH MARKET

So how, exactly, does Johnson envision his business operating?

The condo's client, who must have

a license to grow marijuana for personal medical use, will own or lease the physical space and any equipment with which the crop is grown. The condo would be registered as a non-profit organization — for his troubles setting the business up, Johnson would draw a salary as an administrator. Regulations say that cannabis can be grown by someone designated by the license holder, which opens the door to the cannabis condo employing staff — including horticulturalists, technicians, managers and labourers, so the project will also create jobs.

Because of government regulations, which allow a license holder to designate just one person to grow the crop, each staff member of the condo will only be licensed to take care of one crop. The client will have to specify to the condo how many plants are needed and of what species, although they would have access to the advice and expertise of the condo employees. Clients would buy the initial seeds themselves (subsequent crops could be grown from saved seeds) and pay for the postage and handling to have it shipped. There will also be a required payment to a “common expense fund” that would take care of things like delivery expenses, maintenance and staff.

Johnson promises a good product. His plants would not be blended with ground stalk (which critics charge may be the reason that government test crops in Flin Flon, Manitoba, had low THC levels). And Johnson's clients are assured of no unpleasant surprises such as shortages.

“Unskilled people growing might have disasters and lose plants, [but the patients] need a constant supply,” says Johnson. “With the way I'm doing it, they are secure in a constant supply.”

This is especially important, given that the government has made it clear that its role as supplier is temporary. Many expect the government to revoke that role within months, if not weeks.

Federal Health Minister Anne McLennan insists that the only reason government is supplying weed is because a court ruling essentially forced it to. On January 9, the Superior Court of Ontario ruled that the federal government's medical marijuana access regulations were unconstitutional because they forced patients to use illegal means to obtain a now-legal drug. (An appeal on this decision is pending.)

On July 9, the feds got into the bud business. They put in place an interim policy to provide dried marijuana to those authorized. It costs \$5 a gram, or \$20 for a package of 30 seeds, much lower than street prices which range from \$10-\$25/gram.

But disappointed users say the government-grown plants don't measure up. They charge that the plants sold by the government, originally grown for research in an abandoned mine in Flin Flon by the company Prairie Plant Systems, aren't potent enough to effectively combat side effects of illness. They say the

marijuana is too dried out and has too much stalk and stem to be of much use.

The feds claim their supply contains 10 per cent THC. But laboratory tests organized by the British Columbia-based organization Canadians for Safe Access show the THC levels in the Flin Flon crop are at three per cent. The level of pot from compassion clubs hovers around 10-12 per cent.

Johnson believes that the lower THC rate and the dry, crumbly texture of the weed is a result of improper storage. “My best guess is that the samples tested ten per cent when bagged a year ago and simply deteriorated from light and heat in storage. Vacuum packed and stored in a freezer, they may have well been satisfactory.”

All the more reason to go with Johnson's cannabis condo.

Philippe Lucas, an outspoken medical marijuana activist, is the director of Canadians for Safe Access. “I think Morris is taking a bold and new approach at this,” says Lukas. “I think there still might be a few legal hurdles to overcome. But let's face it, the Health Canada regulations make no sense at all.”

What Lucas finds especially alarming about the Flin Flon crop were the results of the heavy metal testing they did on the government-issued product. Not only were there elevated levels of lead, but traces of arsenic as well, at two parts per million. Not enough to kill a user, but definitely over allowable levels.

Lucas points out that arsenic is one of the chemicals used in mining. “There's some speculation that the ground water was contaminated with arsenic” when the mine was active. “Since this is being distributed by Health Canada as medicine,” says Lukas, “it is a serious concern.”

Because the labs used by CSA want to remain anonymous, Health Canada refuses to take the showings of arsenic, lead and a near-lack of THC into account. The labs wanted anonymity because “they had some serious concerns about repercussions from Health Canada,” Lucas said. The marijuana compared with the government's was contributed by the Vancouver Island Compassion Society, an illegal distribution organization.

The fact that legal, government plants are duds (and potentially hazardous) while illegal plants could genuinely help users is one of the catch-22s that have plagued the struggle to sort out a framework for the growth and distribution of medical marijuana.

Since Canadians were allowed possession of marijuana for medical reasons, 642 have been authorized. As of July 2003, 1,145 people have applied. In Saskatchewan, 53 people have authorization to possess, and 38 doctors have supported an application.

Johnson believes that the official numbers are far lower than the actual demand because “people feeling unsure of whether they can access it.” “You hear a lot of horror stories, and they are scared of the process.”