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# Health Canada denies health care practitioners access to psilocybin for training purposes

The federal agency previously granted Section 56 exemptions to 19 health care professionals in December 2020, allowing them to take part in a historic training program.

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TheraPsil says the decision will affect more than a thousand health care professionals who were on a waiting list for the organization's training program and "thousands of patients who are seeking help in applying for section 56 and SAP access to psilocybin." PHOTO BY ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS

About a month after Health Canada amended the Special Access Program (SAP), allowing physicians to request patient access to restricted drugs, the federal agency has planned to deny dozens of health care professionals Section 56 exemptions to psilocybin for training purposes.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The surprising move was [announced on Twitter by B.C.-based TheraPsil](#), a non-profit dedicated to providing access to psilocybin therapy.



A spokesperson for TheraPsil clarified in an email to *The GrowthOp* that the applicants received an ‘intent to refuse’ letter earlier this week. The letter stated their exemption applications would be denied in 14 calendar days. The applicants were also given 14 days to respond.

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The organization says the decision will affect more than a thousand health care professionals who were on a waiting list for TheraPsil’s training program and “thousands of patients who are seeking help in applying for section 56 and SAP access to psilocybin.”

It's not clear what prompted Health Canada's decision.

Last year, TheraPsil helped 19 health care professionals secure access to [psilocybin for a historic training program](#).

Former Health Minister Patty Hajdu granted the Section 56 exemptions to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* in December 2020, after nearly six months of campaigning and advocacy by the organization.

The 10-week, 100+ hour course focuses on delivering legal, psilocybin-assisted therapy for Canadians experiencing end-of-life and illness-related distress, such as cancer anxiety, depression and demoralization.

The course was designed by Dave Phillips, a registered clinical counsellor.

“Our contention is that doing the medicine yourself is not just interesting, but is requisite to safely hold space for people,” Phillips told *The GrowthOp* last year. “It’s an altered state. This isn’t a normal kind of therapy, right? It’s very, very different than anything any of the therapists would have been used to.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

On Twitter, TheraPsil said the decision “lacks compassion and foresight.”

“This is an issue of patient access and safety. By denying access, Health Canada is forcing patients and practitioners underground,” the organization said, adding that after last year’s decision, a precedent should be set.

“Why has the government created 2 tiers of health care professionals? Why do some get access/exemptions while others are denied? This is against the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.”

The organization added that “the brunt of consequences will be faced by Canadians with mental illness who are seeking psilocybin.”

“Most importantly... this is not about health care professionals, this is about patients who are treatment resistant and will suffer the consequences of this shortsighted decision. There will be consequences,” they tweeted.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

According to the thread, [cannabis lawyer Trina Fraser said that it](#) “appears that Health Canada’s position is that access to psilocybin for training purposes will now only be available via a clinical trial and not a s.56 exemption. This will obviously have a limiting effect.”

Earlier this week, in [a video message posted to YouTube](#), Vancouver-based therapist Carmen Ostrander thanked health minister Jean-Yves Duclos and Carolyn Bennett, minister of mental health and addictions, for their support with Section 56 exemptions.

Ostrander has completed the initial phase of TheraPsil’s training program, but cannot complete the program without an exemption.

“Myself and approximately 140 of my colleagues are urgently waiting for your support to grant us exemptions to work with these medicines so that we can meet the rising tide of despair and suffering in our communities that have been exacerbated by COVID,” Ostrander said.

“We urge you to move on this as soon as you can.”



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