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New hybridpharm combines pharmacy, wellness and cannabis

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Pharmacist and owner Rahim Dhalla has a vision for a modern wellness pharmacy



On a recent Monday, nine people removed their shoes and sat on the floor of a new pharmacy in Ottawa to learn how to meditate.

"It was great to see strangers sitting together and talking to each other about their experience," said Rahim Dhalla, the pharmacist and owner of hybridpharm, a unique pharmacy that opened earlier this month under the Whole Health Pharmacy Partners banner.

"We want our store to be a warm and welcoming place and a big part of our model is to hold events and workshops that help people attain balance in their lifestyle," Dhalla explained, adding that the next workshop is on diet.

But lifestyle modification is only one aspect of his vision for a "modern wellness pharmacy" that specializes in cannabis counselling integrated with traditional pharmacy and compounding.

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Dhalla, who has a PharmD and an MBA, began researching cannabis when his father was diagnosed with cancer. He initiated cannabis treatment for his dad to help with pain and relieve side effects from chemotherapy. The experience inspired Dhalla to focus on medical cannabis counselling and education to support patient access and to offer sound medical advice. After looking at the various banner programs available, he chose Whole Health Pharmacy Partners because “they let me go with my unusual concept.”

“We look at cannabis in a different way than most pharmacy retailers,” says Dean Miller, president and CEO of Whole Health Pharmacy Partners.

“Hybridpharm is our newest store and it comes with a bit of a twist! Rahim shared his vision with us months ago and we were excited to support him create Canada’s first Cannabis Specialty pharmacy. It was easy for us to support someone with a cool idea that supports healthcare for Canadians.”

For now, Dhalla is the sole pharmacist at the store and is slowly building a roster of patients. “I have a good team behind me, each with their separate roles and niches,” he says, noting that his staff includes a part-time nurse practitioner, a cannabis consultant and an operations manager both with experience in the medical cannabis industry, a pharmacy technician who specializes in compounding, a creative director with a passion for alternative medicine and wellness, and an in-house acupuncturist.

With legalization of recreational cannabis coming this fall, Dhalla’s believes his decision to focus on cannabis will serve an important need in the community. “People may not understand the difference between recreational and medical usage,” he explains. “Those selling recreational cannabis are not medically trained and only understand the product as an intoxicant.”

Dhalla’s approach targets the efficacy of usage. “I’ll look at patients medical history and prescription drugs to figure out if they are a right candidate for cannabis. Under the current system, a patient has to get a prescription and then fill out forms to send to the cannabis distributor which then mails them the product. Hybridpharm fits into the model that’s already there.”

But Dhalla hopes that one day he will also be able to dispense medical cannabis. “After all, we already handle medication, including narcotics and we know about interactions between cannabis and other drugs,” he says. “Once legal recreational cannabis rolls out, I think the medical side will complain that they don’t have easy access. Now it takes about five days to receive cannabis in the mail—can you imagine if it took that long to get an asthma drug?”
