

The Business Interview

'I believe that this plant is medicine'

Having worked in the fast-paced finance world in London and New York for many years, JMCC chief executive Diane Scott turned her attention to the emerging medical cannabis industry in 2014. Her company, the Toronto-based Jamaican Medical Cannabis Corporation, is developing its European distribution centre in Jersey. **Ian Heath reports**

DIANE Scott's interest in the medicinal cannabis industry started about seven years ago after she stepped back from her career in financial services, and her interest in what she viewed as 'the next big thing' started to grow.

The Harvard Business School graduate, who formerly worked for ex-US presidential candidate Ross Perot, said that research increasingly led her to firmly believe that the plant had under-utilised qualities as a medicine.

And with her home country of Canada one of the pioneers in updating laws to allow its usage, she started to move forward to develop her business interests in the emerging market.

'I had been watching the medicinal cannabis space for quite some time and I had been talking to a friend, John Neil, who heads our distribution area, about it,' she said.

'I kept saying, you have to get into the medicinal cannabis distribution area - I promise you, it's the next big thing. I came home to Canada and it was just the beginning of the market there.'

'There was an opportunity to invest in a start-up company here in the early days. I made investment and at the same time, my business partner called me to ask what I was doing.'

'I said, I'm going into this - it's really kicking off here in Canada. I genuinely believe that this plant is medicine.'

As her interests in the market grew, she eventually invested in medicinal cannabis growing facilities in Jamaica, where the government had updated its drugs laws to enable cultivation.

She explained that key aspects of work within the industry are research and regulation, and having the right approach was a key reason why they decided to team up with Jersey-based Green Island Growers to establish a distribution centre.

'We have to be very cognisant of the fact that we're growing a product that people who have compromised immune systems, who could be at the end of their life, are going to be using,' she said.

'We want to ensure that the product we provide is going to help make their lives better, rather than in anyway harm them. And so we always ensure that we're looking for partners that are focused on the medical aspect, the science and research. Certainly with Green Island Growers, as they move to achiev-

ing their own medical cannabis cultivation license, that is their focus - they see this the same way.'

Research has suggested the medical cannabis can help with a range of conditions such as nausea, appetite loss, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, pain, muscle spasms and seizures.

Ms Scott said that she hoped the UK and European markets would learn lessons from Canada and start incorporating it into their medical treatment programmes.

'I'd like to think that what we'll see in the UK is a recognition of what has happened in other parts of the world like Canada, where we are seeing the adoption,' she said.

'What I worry about is the potential blurring of the lines of recreational users and medical users. The medical product isn't going to get someone get high on THC, it needs to be prescribed by a doctor and it needs to be used under adoptive care, just like any other medicine. We have to make sure that as different countries are educating their consumers or the patient, there's a realisation that it is a different product.'

She added: 'In terms of the UK and Jersey, I think the adoption is there but it is coming predominantly from people who have been using the products anyway and are comfortable with them.'

'What we need to see, and it will naturally evolve, is where we are seeing other demographics who historically would have said "crazy. I'm not touching it" to having doctors saying "this is going to help you".'

'What we have seen in Canada, which is really encouraging, is an increasing number of seniors who are willing to use it.'

An example of the successful use of medical cannabis that she pointed to as life-changing was the case of a young girl, treated by JMCC's chief medical officer Dr Evan Lewis, who suffers from severe and debilitating epilepsy.

'Dr Evan Lewis is growing into probably one of the leading paediatric epilepsy specialists using medical cannabis in the world and he's been using it in his practice for years,' she said.

'I spoke at Cambridge University a year ago, pre-Covid, and I showed a video of a patient of Evan's, an 18-month-old little girl who has drug-resistant paediatric epilepsy, meaning she has up to 100 seizures a day. When trying to even just get through a door she was having difficulty con-



■ Diane Scott surveying JMCC's Jamaican site last year pre-Covid. There are now 15 9,000-square-foot greenhouses being built on the site. Picture: JMCC

trolling her arms and legs. Then, when she had been on medical cannabis treatment for just under two years, she can do things again, like walk her dog, and she's a regular little girl.'

'That's what I want to see happening.'

'I believe that this plant is medicine. There's enough evidence out there now to say let's stop being afraid, let's regulate it - having it responsibly regulated is really important - and let's stop the fear that some people create because they have a negative impression of it. There's enough research happening in Israel, in Canada and the United States and elsewhere to realise that there's something there.'

JMCC are taking part in the Twenty21 observational study of medicinal cannabis in the UK run by Drug Science.

This involves 20,000 patients being monitored and the effect and tolerability of the drug being assessed in relation to eight conditions. Advice and statistics is being provided from JMCC based on the medicinal cannabis market from their experience in Canada.

Number of registered patients in Canada

As of September 2020, there were 420,235 Canadians registered as medical cannabis users. Last summer, the number of medicinal cannabis patient registrations grew by 24% after plateauing in 2019 following the legalisation of adult use. Some of that growth is



■ Diane Scott: 'We want to ensure that the product we provide is going to help make their lives better'

also attributed to an increase in number of elderly patients.

Growth of legal vs illegal sales

Canadian household spending on legal cannabis overall in the last half of 2020 outpaced the illicit market for the first time. Household spending on recreational cannabis reached \$648 million in the second quarter of 2020, a 74% increase over the same period last year.

Meanwhile, spending on medicinal cannabis was approximately \$155 million in the second quarter. Canadian household spending on illicit cannabis fell to a new low of \$784 million in the second quarter. Taken together,

the legal-cannabis market now accounts for 50.5% of all cannabis-related spending in Canada.

As the major first-mover market, Canada's experience suggests that many people will opt for a safer, regulated product if it's available at a comparable cost to the unregulated market.

Medical cannabis in Europe

Currently around 30 countries in and around Europe have legalised cannabis for medical purposes to some extent, although in several cases it is quite limited, e.g. approved cannabis-based pharmaceuticals like Sativex or Marjionol only or very limited access to other products.