

What it's like to be a marijuana-friendly doctor in New York

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Cannabis consultations have become a new source of revenue this year for Dr. Dara Huang, who also treats kidney problems and practices “culinary medicine” from her office in Manhattan. But it takes a lot of legwork to deal with the [challenges of participating](#) in the state’s medical-marijuana program, both for her and her patients.

“I’ve created this whole pathway so someone can come see me and go from A to Z without a hitch,” said Huang, speaking to *Crain’s* at the Cannabis World Congress and Business Exposition in Manhattan last week. “Patients

already are at the end of their rope by the time they come to me."

Huang is among the first group of 600 doctors who have [registered to recommend cannabis](#) in New York so far (federal law forbids doctors from "prescribing" cannabis, so they use what are referred to as recommendations). With a little extra effort, she's been able to find a way around some of the common problems physicians and patients face.

Huang makes frequent calls and visits to dispensaries to find out [which cannabis formats](#) are available at each location so her patients don't show up with recommendations for products that aren't currently being offered. Dispensary owners say that's been a common problem.

She also reaches out to hospital physicians directly to let them know they can refer patients to her. The state's registry of cannabis-friendly doctors is only accessible to other physicians, and Huang found that her own contact information in the database is incorrect.

"You have to put a lot of work into this," Huang said. "It's taken me months to make this work."

Still, cannabis treatment can be expensive for her patients, with both drugs and physician visits rarely covered by insurance.

A recent informal survey by the Drug Policy Alliance of 255 patients and caregivers seeking cannabis medication in New York found that the cost of consulting with a doctor can be prohibitive. Prospective patients are required to have a previous relationship with the doctor who certifies them to use medical marijuana, a process that can require multiple visits. Once certified, patients must make an additional visit for the doctor to issue a recommendation that can be taken to a dispensary.

Of 79 respondents surveyed by the Drug Policy Alliance who had obtained a doctor's certification, only a third said their initial consultations were covered by insurance. About 20% said they paid more than \$300 for the visit.

After speaking with other doctors who can recommend cannabis, Huang said she's heard of prices ranging from \$250 per visit to \$800; she falls somewhere in that wide range.

Her efforts to bill insurers for cannabis patient visits have led to audits by two insurance companies, Huang said. And while most of her Yelp reviews are positive, one Yelper who visited but did not get certified railed against Huang for allegedly charging more than what was advertised.

Wary of the scrutiny, Huang is careful to make it clear that cannabis consultations do not make up the majority of her business. "This is just a service I provide," she said.