

MPs get a lesson on grow houses from police

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Ontario met in Ottawa with a group of MPs to discuss the issues related to marijuana operations.

Det.-Sgt. Miner said the meeting was mainly to raise the MPs' awareness about the size of the problem. There are an estimated 10,000 grow houses in the GTA alone, most of them bypassing hydro meters to run their operations, costing utilities hundreds of thousands of dollars and posing threats of fire and electrocution to their neighbours.

But the police also touched on home invasions and homicides related to grow houses.

"Most of us are baby boomers, who look back at the '60s when marijuana wasn't seen as a problem,"

The MPs sat in silence for most of the police presentation, Det.-Sgt. Miner said.

"They didn't realize what was out there," he said. "We're not making this up, it wasn't for the shock of it. If there's not immediate changes (to legislation) made, we can't cope through the courts and education."

The police contingent told the MPs people charged with operating grow houses are essentially rewarded with lenient penalties for pleading guilty in court.

"By the sheer volume of what we have, there's not enough court space to handle them all," Det.-Sgt. Miner said. "There's a lack of deterrence. In the countries most of these people come from, they would have capital punishment. Basically, we're decriminalizing the activity."

He said the Charter of Rights and Freedoms takes away tools the police need to fight the problem.

"There's more rights for criminals

than victims," he said. "We're pushing for eradication tools."

That includes legislation to make it much easier for police to obtain search warrants.

"Each house we raid accounts for about 120 police man-hours," he said.

Durham MP Alex Shepherd, who set up the meeting, admitted most of the politicians were surprised by what they heard.

"Most of us are baby boomers, who look back at the '60s when marijuana wasn't seen as a problem," he said. "With our debates about decriminalizing marijuana, we seem to be out of the

loop."

But Mr. Shepherd said it is premature to talk about new legislation to combat the problem.

"We should be thinking more about changing the administrative side, rather than the legislative side," he said. "It isn't simply a federal matter, it also involves provincial and municipal governments."

Det.-Sgt. Miner said the MPs were also surprised by the number of grow houses in the GTA.

"We, as a country, can't consume the amount they're producing. It's the third highest agricultural product in Ontario."

He said much of what is produced is exported to the United States.

Mr. Shepherd agreed.

"The U.S. treats this more seriously than we do," he said. "We are seen internationally as the source for high-quality marijuana."

Det.-Sgt. Miner doesn't see it that way. "This is not true hydroponics," he said. "This (marijuana) is not organically grown. It is genetically modified and chemically treated with no controls. There's no honour among these people."

Several grow houses have been found in recent years in Markham and Whitchurch-Stouffville.

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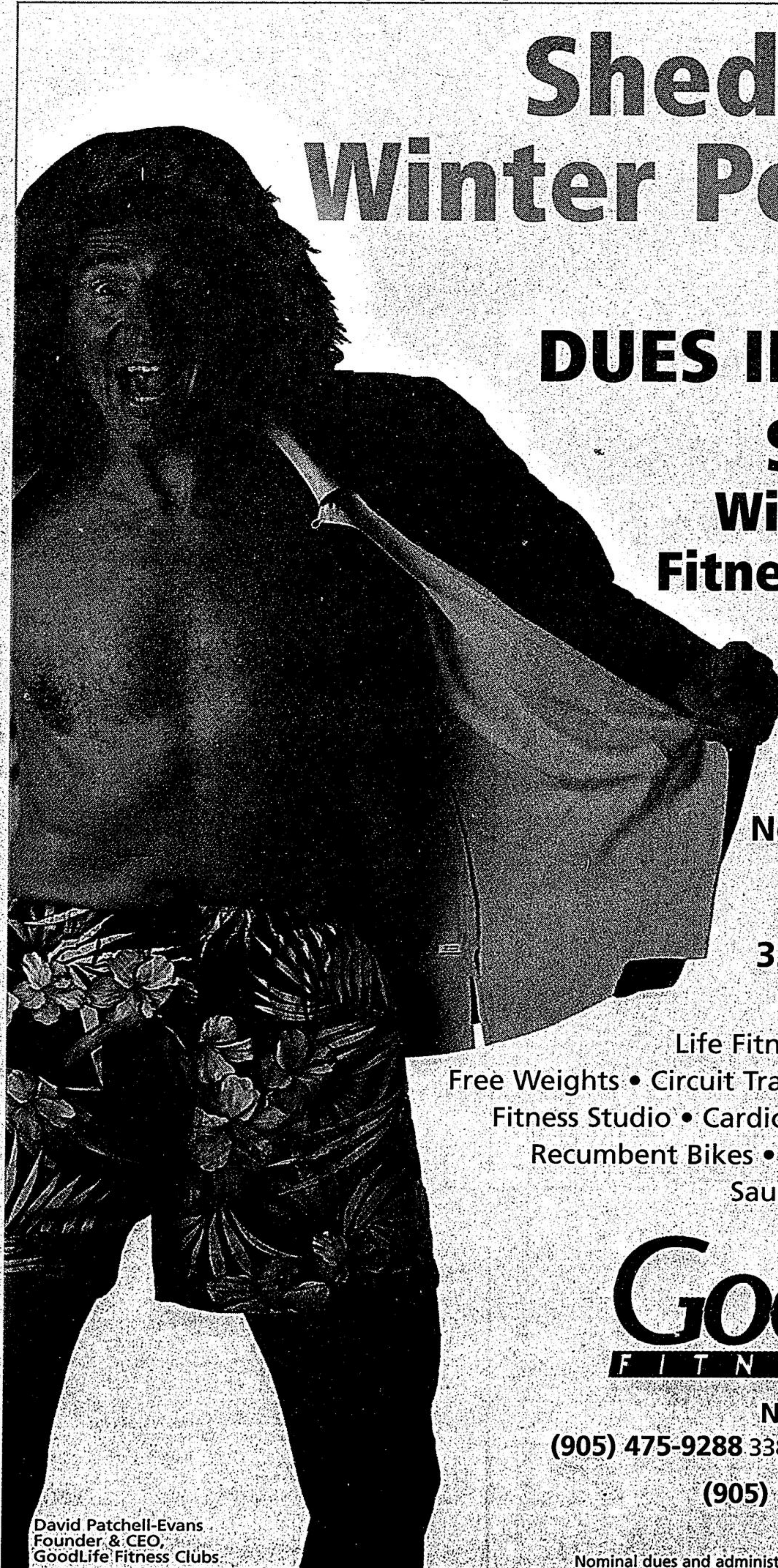
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