Ensuring fair access to high quality medical cannabis for patients in Europe

About Cannabis Europe

Cannabis Europe is a patient driven advocacy group composed of scientific organisations, academia, patients organisations, NGOs and industry, which aims to ensure patient access to high quality, safe, cannabis-derived medicines and to demonstrate their benefits for patients to European policy-makers.

About medical cannabis

Cannabis-derived medicines are recognised for their therapeutic effects. Firstly, they can contribute positively to the treatment of a wide range of diseases and disorders such as multiple sclerosis (MS), seizures, HIV/AIDS, and mental disorders, as well as associated symptoms. Secondly, they are instrumental in relieving patients from the pain induced by some of the treatment methods for various diseases including cancers. Yet, despite growing awareness and interest within patient and medical communities, the regulatory framework for medical cannabis remains fragmented across the European Union. This lack of harmonisation hampers European patients' access to high-quality cannabis-derived medicines.

Cannabis Europe aims to provide European patients with safe access to high-quality cannabis-derived medicines.

Cannabis Europe calls for:

1. **A clear definition of** and **a harmonised European regulatory framework for medical cannabis**.
2. A solid **research and innovation budget** (under Horizon Europe) with a view to enhancing knowledge on medical cannabis and ensuring a positive societal perception of medical cannabis while developing potential future applications for cannabis derived medicines.

From a fragmented regulatory landscape towards a European approach to medical cannabis

At present, the regulatory framework for medical cannabis remains fragmented across the European Union (EU). For example, Member States enforce different rules for maximum levels of Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and Cannabidiol (CBD)[1] in cannabis-derived medicines. In addition approaches vary between Member States regarding the production, licensing, distribution and reimbursement costs for medical cannabis.

This lack of harmonisation is detrimental to European patients as it hampers their access to affordable high-quality medicines.

On 13 February 2019, the European Parliament voted and approved a motion for a resolution on the use of cannabis for medical purposes[2]. The motion, which was tabled by the European Parliament Environment and Public Safety (ENVI) Committee, calls on the European Commission and national authorities to work together to provide a legal definition of medical cannabis. The motion also urges to draw a clear distinction between (1) cannabis-derived medicines approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) or other regulatory agencies, (2) medical use of cannabis not supported by clinical trials, and (3) other applications of cannabis.

Cannabis Europe welcomes the motion for a resolution and thanks the Members of the European Parliament who initiated this process. It is now crucial that the European Commission and Member States work towards the completion of such a definition as the first step towards providing patients with a harmonized, European regulatory framework on medical cannabis.

R&I: towards a solid budget for research on medical cannabis

The European institutions[3] are aiming at delivering the largest EU-funded research and innovation programme, called Horizon Europe, to start in 2020. Currently provisioned with a €100bn budget, it is projected to allocate €52.7 bn to address societal and industrial challenges, including health-related issues. In addition, the motion for a resolution of the European Parliament calls on Member States and the European Commission to address not only priority research topics on cannabis, but also consider the allocation of funds under Horizon Europe.

Considering that research on medical cannabis has been largely underfunded at national level and absent at European level, Horizon Europe provides the opportunity to assess the allocation of a specific budget for enhancing our knowledge on medical cannabis and ultimately develop safe and sound medical solutions for European patients.

[1] THC constitutes the main psychoactive and addictive constituent of cannabis while CBD has no intoxicating or addictive properties.
[2] 2018/2775(RSP)
[3] European Commission, European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union (comprising Member States).

Such research could explore the use of THC, CBD and other cannabinoids for medical treatments including an evaluation of their effects on the human body. Ultimately, Horizon Europe would be instrumental in assessing the medical benefits of the cannabis-derived medicines which some patients already rely upon.

In addition, research needs to fill the gaps in scientific communication, reaching out to the medical and patient communities, as well as to society at large. This is crucial to ensure all stakeholders are aware of the latest scientific knowledge and research outcomes and is also an important way to dismantle societal misperceptions and deep-rooted negative attitudes towards cannabis-based medicines.

Call to actions

Currently, the regulatory framework around cannabis used in medical applications is fragmented across European Member States, leading to a lack of harmonisation in patients' access to medical cannabis. Furthermore, research on the benefits of medical cannabis in treating diseases or symptoms of illness remains limited in scope and requires the allocation of dedicated funds to increase our knowledge and provide patients with safe and sound cannabis-derived medicines.

Cannabis Europe calls on the European institutions:

1. **A clear definition of** and **a harmonised European regulatory framework for medical cannabis**.
2. A solid **research and innovation budget** (under Horizon Europe) with a view to enhancing knowledge on medical cannabis, ensuring positive societal perception of medical cannabis while developing potential future applications for cannabis derived medicines.