Resolution on use of cannabis for medicinal purposes

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution tabled by the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety on the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes. The resolution notes that several cannabinoids which make up the cannabis plant, can help reduce certain symptoms affecting patients such as chronic pain, inflammation or bacterial infections and can stimulate bone growth. There is evidence that cannabis or cannabinoids may be effective in increasing appetite and decreasing weight loss associated with HIV/AIDS, in alleviating symptoms of mental disorders such as psychosis or Tourette syndrome, and in alleviating symptoms of epilepsy, as well as Alzheimers, arthritis, asthma, cancer, and Crohns disease.

Parliament pointed out that EU Member States differ widely in their approach to legislation on cannabis for medical purposes, such as on the maximum allowed levels of THC and CBD concentrations, which can lead to difficulties for countries applying a more prudent approach. Whilst the policy landscape for medical cannabis is evolving in the EU and worldwide, misunderstandings still exist even among national administrations regarding the different uses of cannabis, with the legalisation on cannabis for recreational use often being confused with the need to provide legal access to cannabis for medical purposes to all patients in need.

The resolution called on the Commission and the Member States to address the regulatory, financial and cultural barriers that weigh on scientific research into the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes and on research into cannabis in general. It considered that research on the potential benefits of medicines derived from cannabis has been underfunded and should be properly addressed under the forthcoming Ninth Framework Programme, with a view to exploring, inter alia, the possible uses of THC, CBD and other cannabinoids for medical treatment, including lessons drawn from the experience of off-label prescribing of cannabis.

Member States were asked to allow doctors to make free use of their professional judgement in prescribing regulatory-approved cannabis-based medicines to patients with relevant conditions, and to allow pharmacists to lawfully honour those prescriptions.

Parliament invited the Commission to:

- work with national authorities to provide a legal definition of medical cannabis, and to draw a clear distinction between cannabis-based medicines approved by the EMA or other regulatory agencies, medical cannabis not supported by clinical trials, and other applications of cannabis (e.g. recreational or industrial) ;

- develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure the highest standards for independent research, development, authorisation, marketing and pharmacovigilance and to avoid the abuse of products derived from cannabis;

- establish a network which would bring together the EMA, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), responsible national authorities and patient organisations, civil society, social partners, consumer organisations, healthcare professionals and NGOs, along with other relevant stakeholders, in order to ensure effective implementation of the strategy for cannabis-based medicines;

- work with Member States to improve equal access to cannabis-based medicines and to ensure that, where allowed, medicines which are effective in treating specific conditions are covered by health insurance schemes in the same way as other medicines.

- work with Member States to ensure that safe and controlled cannabis used for medicinal purposes can only be in the form of cannabis-derived products that have gone through clinical trials, regulatory assessment and approval;

- ensure that research into, and use of, medical cannabis in the Union does not in any way favour criminal drugs networks or lead to their expansion;

The resolution called on Member States to:

- reconsider their relevant legislation on the use of cannabis-based medicines when scientific research proves that the same positive effect cannot be achieved by using ordinary medicines that do not have addictive effects;

- provide a safe and equal choice for patients between different types of cannabis-based medicine, while ensuring that patients are accompanied by specialised medical professionals during their treatment;

- ensure sufficient availability of cannabis-based medicines that cater for actual needs, either by means of production in accordance with their national medical standards or perhaps through imports that comply with their national requirements for cannabis-based medicines;

- provide medical professionals with proper medical training and to encourage increased knowledge on medical cannabis based on independent and wide-ranging research.