# Towards a European Approach on Medicinal Cannabis

## Conference Report

On 13 October, Medicinal Cannabis Europe together with MEPs Frédérique Ries, Alex Agius Saliba and Tilly Metz organised the conference *"Towards a European Approach on Medicinal Cannabis*". The conference brought together members of the European Parliament, the European Commission (the Commission), medicinal and patients' communities, as well as industry representatives. The speakers addressed the need for a European approach on medicinal cannabis and assessed possible solutions to move forward.

In her introductory remarks, **MEP Ries** stressed the need to ensure patients' fair access to medicinal cannabis. Priorities should include more research, as well as the establishment of a common European definition on medicinal cannabis.

The conference consisted of three panel discussions focused on patients' fair access, research priorities and best practices to be considered for a European approach.

### Panel 1 - Patients' Access: Hurdles and Solutions

The first panel focused on the difficulties that patients experience in accessing medicinal cannabis.

**Carola Pérez**, patient and director of Spanish patient support group, Dosemociones, presented the barriers Spanish patients encounter when purchasing medicinal cannabis. At present, the Spanish government does not support medicinal cannabis because of a lack of scientific evidence. Therefore, many patients are forced to acquire the needed medication via the black market, with associated legal and safety risks. Carola addressed EU policymakers outlining the unequal rights citizens have throughout Europe (German patients have access, Spanish do not) and asked why such difference could exist within the European Union.

In addition to the first testimony, **Jaqueline Poitras**, founder of Mamaka – Mothers for Cannabis, pointed out the importance of considering patients' experience for facilitating patients' access. Scientists and doctors should take into account patients' first-hand knowledge of medicinal cannabis to better understand the treatments. She also stressed that healthcare professionals should be trained to facilitate access and better care.

**Maja Leon Grzymkowska**, Policy Officer at European Commission's Directorate-General Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE), Unit Medical Products: Quality, Safety and Innovation, explained the medicine authorisation process at the EU level and how this reflects upon the placement of medicinal cannabis products in the EU market. She also emphasised that the Commission had assessed how Directive 2004/24/EC on herbal medicinal products could

possibly be used for medicinal cannabis but found that this was not currently an appropriate mechanism. She acknowledged the necessity to find solutions for patients, but these could only occur within the existing framework. She emphasised that, as a first step, the Commission should look into a definition of medicinal cannabis, gathering enough scientific data as medicinal cannabis had to satisfy the same registration criteria as conventional pharmaceuticals. Meantime the Commission tasked the Herbal Medicinal Products Committee to prepare a glossary of terms for medicinal cannabis.

**MEP Metz** presented the approach Luxembourg follows. It allows the prescription of cannabis-based medication only for certain illnesses. She concluded that cannabis-based medication should be accessible for any patient in need and the EU should make sure patients are supported by doctors. She also reflected upon the EU Beating Cancer Plan and the EU Pharmaceutical Strategy as two opportunities to include medicinal cannabis as a solution for patients.

## Panel 2 - Research and Innovation: Priorities under Horizon Europe

The second panel highlighted the need for more research and discussed how Horizon Europe could support research on medicinal cannabis.

**Quentin Galland**, Deputy Secretary General of Medicinal Cannabis Europe, stressed the importance of including research on medicinal cannabis in the scope of Horizon Europe. He emphasised that the benefits of cannabis-based medications should be supported with science-based evidence, and that this would require to invest budget on research and innovation. Quentin outlined that Horizon Europe and its intervention areas on quality of life and chronic pain should foster research on medicinal cannabis.

**Dr. Vincenzo Costigliola** put emphasis on the importance of respecting the patient's perspectives and their need for solutions, registering medicinal cannabis as a medication and training medical personnel. Doctors need to be informed and educated on how to use cannabis-based medication. The only way to fulfil these points is by carrying out clinical trials and intensive research.

**Monica Ensini**, Scientific and Policy Officer at the Commission DG Research and Innovation (DG RTD), Unit Combatting Diseases, acknowledged the possibility of using Horizon Europe grants for research on medicinal cannabis under the intervention area "chronic pain". Ms. Ensini recommended researchers to get creative, focus on un-met needs of the patients, work on realistic clinical trials and collaborate with other researchers to increase the chances of receiving funding. She also emphasised that proposals should involve patients and nurture their feedback throughout the project duration since patients have experience with medicinal cannabis.

## Panel 3 - European Single Market: Best Practices and Towards a Harmonised Approach

During the final panel, speakers addressed the fragmentation of the European cannabis market. They discussed approaches EU Member States are following for medicinal cannabis and ponder these for developing a European approach.

**PhD Liesbeth Vandam**, Head of Sector at the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, highlighted that there are still many EU citizens without an access to cannabis-based medications. The non-existence of a clear distinction between different products makes it hard for policymakers to achieve common regulations in every country. She provided an overview of the regulatory framework followed by EU countries for medicinal cannabis.

**Joscha Krauss**, CEO of MedicalHemp, presented the situation in Germany. The government allows doctors to prescribe cannabis-based medications to their patients and in most cases insurance companies reimburse the costs. But even though there are some positive changes in Germany, the industry still has to overcome many obstacles as medicinal cannabis is still highly regulated by drug law, pharmaceutical law and via local authorities. Furthermore, he pointed out that the historic illegality of cannabis means that there is not an existing body of scientific data about its efficacy. This creates a barrier for introducing medicinal cannabis as the submission of such a dossier is a requirement for registration of medicines under the existing EU regulatory framework and might take many years to develop. Therefore, a different regulatory solution is urgently needed

Lastly, **MEP Saliba** presented the situation in Malta and emphasised his support to the development of a legislative framework which will ensure the availability, accessibility and affordability of medicinal cannabis. The EU-wide framework should facilitate business and promote consolidation of a single European medicinal cannabis market. A harmonised legislation would secure patients' access to medicinal cannabis anywhere in Europe, without any delay and barriers.

## Closing Remarks

MEP Ries conveyed her gratitude to all participants, outlined the importance of having an open discussion on medicinal cannabis whilst presenting the next steps to be taken. She called on the European Commission to establish a common European definition of medicinal cannabis, as well as to allocate budget for research on the use of cannabis for medical treatments. These are crucial first steps towards securing patients' equal rights throughout Europe and developing an EU-wide medicinal cannabis value chain.

In 2019, the European Parliament passed a resolution on medicinal cannabis, which acknowledged some of these issues and called on the Commission to take a series of efforts (e.g. defining medicinal cannabis). At the conference Ms. Ries announced that the European Parliament will launch a new resolution which will ask the Commission to start working on improving access to medicinal cannabis for patients.