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Calls for Legalisation of Cannabis

By Ian Sample

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Cannabis should be made legal in Britain for medicinal uses, according to a cross-party group of MPs and peers who led an inquiry into the drug's potential to help patients. The recommendation from the group chaired by Lady Meacher would put the UK in line with at least 11 other European countries and 24 US states where laws already allow people to use the drug to alleviate chronic pain and other symptoms.

In a report published on Tuesday, the group calls on the government to introduce a system that grants people access to cannabis for medical reasons, and to decriminalise the growing of small amounts at home for the same purposes. The group took evidence from more than 600 patients and medical professionals on the use of cannabis as a medicine and commissioned a consultant neurologist, Prof Mike Barnes, to review published research on the drug's potential to alleviate medical problems.

His review found "good evidence" that cannabis can help with chronic pain, muscle spasms often associated with multiple sclerosis, the management of anxiety, and nausea and vomiting, particularly when caused as a side-effect of chemotherapy. The inquiry heard that scores of patients had sought out cannabis to relieve their symptoms even though it was illegal, and that users often found it impossible to get expert medical guidance or supervision as to how they should take the drug. The report claims 30,000 people in the UK use cannabis as a medicine, but adds that the figure could be as high as 1 million, according to the campaign group End Our Pain.

"In Professor Barnes's report we now have irrefutable evidence that cannabis is an effective medicine for very large numbers of people," Meacher told the *Guardian*. "These are people who are suffering the most appalling chronic illness involving severe neuropathic pain, interminable nausea, and anxiety, and all these conditions can be helped, not in every case, but in many cases where prescribed medicines do not work or because there are such appalling side-effects that the person is worse off with prescribed medicine than without

"About 30,000 patients in the UK currently risk arrest and in some cases are being arrested for buying their medicine from illegal drug dealers, and that is an appalling state of affairs," Meacher added. "This money goes to drug dealers and terrorists, and we could avoid putting this money into the hands of these people by legalising cannabis for medicinal uses."

The report, *Access to Medicinal Cannabis: Meeting Patient Needs*, from the all-party parliamentary group for drug policy reform, challenges the government's classification of cannabis under schedule 1, which is reserved for drugs that have no recognised medicinal uses. Under the scheme, the production, possession and supply of cannabis, along with LSD and mescaline, is allowed only for research and other special purposes.

Caroline Lucas, the co-leader of the Green party and an author of the report, said: "The case for legalising the production and use of medicinal cannabis is overwhelming. Doing so would give immediate relief to people in pain, and the evidence from around the world shows that it can be done without increasing drug-related harms."

David Nutt, formerly the government's chief drugs adviser and now a professor of neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College London, said it was "outrageous" that the government had "dragged its heels" over legalising cannabis for medicinal uses. The pursuit of patients who used the drug to alleviate pain and other symptoms caused harm and wasted vast amounts of taxpayers' money in police and court time, he added.

Mark Ware, a medical cannabis researcher at McGill University in Montreal, said that if the UK was serious about legalising medicinal cannabis, it would do well to learn from the Canadian legal framework. "We have encountered many of the issues that the UK will inevitably face," he said, citing the supply of quality-controlled cannabis with a choice of varieties and routes of administration, education on using the drug, and health risks. "Medical cannabis access is an issue that should be faced head-on, openly and collaboratively," he said. "It is not an issue that patients or health professionals can afford to ignore."