

Medicinal Marijuana for MS in NSW

3rd August, 2016



The NSW government has just passed legislation that now makes medicinal marijuana or medicinal cannabis legal in New South Wales. The legalisation was the result of amendments to the state's Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Regulations.

Under new laws, which came into effect on 1st August 2016, a medical practitioner can make an application through NSW Health to the Commonwealth Therapeutic Goods Administration on behalf of patients to access cannabis and cannabis-derived products. It is not clear at this stage which patients will be able to access these

products, but it is likely to include people with MS and people with severe epilepsy and cancer patients in circumstances where other medications have proved ineffective.

Previously, cannabis-based medicines have only been available to patients enrolled in clinical trials. In 2012, the Therapeutic Goods Administration of Australia approved the use of Sativex, a cannabis-derived spray for the treatment of muscle spasticity in MS. However, due to the national and individual states drugs and poisons schedules, the drug was not made available. Earlier this year, the Federal Government made amendments to the Narcotic Drugs Act opening the door for individual states to legislate the medicinal use of cannabis, which NSW has now done. Queensland is currently reviewing their regulations and Victorian legislation that passed through parliament in April 2016 will allow people in Victoria to legally access medicinal cannabis products from early 2017.

Of note, the NSW legalisation change specifically covers medicinal cannabis products that have not been assessed by the Therapeutics Goods Administration and listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods, so this legislative amendment in NSW will not change the availability of drugs such as Sativex, which is classified as Schedule 8.

The availability of medicinal cannabis products is currently unclear, with details of production and distribution of such products still requiring some clarification. Under the amendment to the Regulation a patient will only be able to access a medicinal cannabis product either through a licensed medical practitioner or via a pharmacist under prescription from a medical practitioner.

From a scientific point of view, the efficacy of cannabis in MS is still emerging. There are no clinical studies that have proven medical cannabis to be effective in treating the relapses or progression of MS. However, there is clinical trial evidence that the cannabis-derived product can help alleviate the symptoms of spasticity in some people with MS. Side effects of cannabis-based medications have been reported to include dizziness, drowsiness, difficulty concentrating and memory disturbance.

The NSW Minister for Medical Research Pru Goward said 'Patients wishing to investigate the use of cannabis-based medicines will need to talk with their doctor about suitability'. MS Research Australia welcomes this news and supports any evidence based medicines that increase the options available to help people manage the symptoms of MS