



# MS Society policy position statement

## Use of medicinal cannabis

### Key issues

In 2014 we conducted a survey of people across the UK with MS to ask what their experiences of cannabis and Sativex (the only licensed cannabis derived drug for treating MS symptoms) were. The results found widespread support for legalisation for the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes amongst people with MS (72% in favour) and that 22% of people had tried illegal cannabis to help with their symptoms.

In 2014 the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommended that Sativex was not a cost effective treatment and should not be offered by the NHS.

Many people who feel that they would benefit from its use cannot afford to access it privately. Sativex was approved for use on the NHS in Wales by the All Wales Medicines Strategy Group (AWMSG) but research undertaken by the MS Society has shown that people are still struggling to access it despite this decision (with a survey of in 2016 showing the percentage of people on Sativex had not increased since 2013).

Anecdotal evidence (from focus groups on cannabis) suggest many who would like to access Sativex are turning to the illegal alternative, and are looking to other sources than the MS Society for advice.

While we continue to call for access to all licensed treatments to be made available on the NHS, Sativex is currently out of reach for the majority of people with MS who want to use it. We do not currently expect any change in position in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

To get a better understanding of the potential benefit of cannabinoids in treating MS symptoms, we conducted a review of the clinical evidence and asked a group of medical advisers whether it was possible to reach a consensus on the question 'on the balance of probability could the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes improve the quality of life for people living with MS?'.

With a number of caveats as to how and who cannabis could potentially benefit, including that it should not be smoked and should not be a standalone or first line treatment, the consensus reached by the medical advisers was that it could

potentially improve the quality of life for approximately 25% of people with MS with pain and spasticity symptoms.

While they recognised the medicinal properties within cannabis, there were a number of issues raised over how people could currently access these benefits, including the difficulty in accessing licensed cannabis derived medicines and also the unknown formulations and dosages involved when people source illegal cannabis. The medical advisers were not consulted on the legal status of cannabis.

We held four focus groups across the UK to ask people with MS how our updated policy position should best reflect the information gathered. People with MS highlighted that, while not everyone feels that cannabis would be right for them, they support the right of others to use it. They all felt that they would ideally like to see legal cannabis derived products on the NHS and that they would like to see further research into its efficacy.

While the focus groups were largely supportive of legalisation, most did not see it as a priority issue for the MS Society. All of the focus groups requested that we provide more information on cannabis to support people making an informed decision.

### **Proposed position**

- On the 'balance of probability' the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes could improve the quality of life for a large minority of people by treating their spasticity and pain symptoms, where other symptom management treatments prove ineffective.
- Cannabis should not be considered as a treatment for MS to be used in isolation, and people should be aware of the associated risks and side effects. This includes, but is not limited to, smoking which can negatively impact on an individual's MS.
- Current clinical evidence is not conclusive and further research is needed to understand how different formulations of cannabinoids, in different forms, could benefit MS symptoms.
- As a funder of research, the MS Society is open to research proposals which wish to explore the medicinal properties of cannabinoids.
- People with MS should be able to access objective information on the efficacy and legal ramifications of taking cannabis.
- The MS Society understands that some people with MS may feel they have no option but to use illegal cannabis to treat their pain and spasticity symptoms. However, illegal cannabis includes unknown combinations of cannabinoids (such as THC and CBD), which presents additional risks and uncertainties.
- The MS Society does not consider it is in the public interest to prosecute people who have made the decision to use cannabis to ease their symptoms.
- Moreover, in lieu of access to cannabis derived drugs on the NHS, the MS Society regards it as incumbent on the Government to develop a legal

framework which enables people with MS to access the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes in a safe and legal way, where there is sufficient evidence that it can treat their symptoms.

- Failing this the Government should introduce a defence so that for example possession of cannabis for medicinal purposes would not be a criminal offence.
- As part of our campaign for all licensed treatments for MS to be made available on the NHS, the MS Society will continue to call for Sativex to be made routinely available on the NHS across the UK.