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Cannabis card to help millions in pain

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Police chiefs are backing a new “cannabis card” that will provide de-facto decriminalisation of the drug for millions of people with health conditions.

Up to three and a half million with cancer, multiple sclerosis, depression, arthritis and several other illnesses could be eligible to use the card.

It will identify the holder as a “registered medical cannabis patient” and officers say it will give them a justification for not arresting someone in possession of the drug.

The Police Federation of England and Wales, which represents rank and file officers, has endorsed the scheme and the National Police Chiefs Council, which represents senior officers, is working with the card’s organisers on design and implementation.

Officers increasingly find themselves arresting patients with debilitating conditions who use cannabis to alleviate their symptoms. More than a million Britons, including 90,000 with cancer and 230,000 with arthritis, self-medicate with cannabis bought on the black market.

Medical cannabis has been legal in Britain for nearly two years but strict rules mean that only a handful of people have been able to get an NHS prescription. Patients can pay for a private consultation and prescription but the cost has proven prohibitive for most, forcing them to buy the drug illegally or to grow their own.

Anyone caught in possession of cannabis without a prescription faces up to five years in prison, an unlimited fine, or both.

The cannabis card, or CanCard, a private initiative that starts in November, provides those who need medical cannabis but cannot afford a prescription with help to avoid arrest.

Simon Kempton, of the Police Federation, said: “Our members didn’t join the police to lock up these people.”

He added: “This is an initiative that I support, for a number of reasons. Primarily it gives officers information on which to base their decision-making, around whether or not to use discretion or to arrest a member of public.”

Jason Harwin, of the police council, said: “This is a real live issue, where the police service finds itself stuck in the middle of a situation where individuals should legitimately be able to access their prescribed medication but because of availability and cost they can’t and therefore to address their illness rely on having to use illicit cannabis.”

Mr Harwin added: “The card isn’t a get out of jail free card . . . it does not give holders the right to carry illicit drugs. It’s a flag to us that the person should be accessing medication.”

The police council is trying to ensure the card is not exploited by organised crime. It also intends to try to get a uniform approach across the country when officers are presented with it.

The card, which is being funded by companies that make medical cannabis products, also has the backing of a cross-party group of MPs.

Last year, a YouGov survey found that almost 3 per cent of the adult population, 1.4 million people, were using **cannabis** for a medical condition. A further two million who are not using the drug may be eligible for the card, the research suggests.

The scheme is the idea of Carly Barton, 33, a former university lecturer who suffered a stroke at 24, triggering nerve damage that left her in constant pain. She was prescribed opiates but they left her sedated. In desperation she tried **cannabis** and found she was pain free and able to lead a productive life. However, she could not afford the private prescription of £1,000 so decided to grow her own. The police raided her house and confiscated her plants.

Case study

Kayleigh Ross suffered the stress and indignity of six policemen and sniffer dogs raiding her home in Shetland in front of her five children because she was taking **cannabis** to treat the symptoms of her nerve disorders (Andrew Ellson writes).

Over the past six years Ms Ross, 26, has been diagnosed with functional neurological disorder, trigeminal neuralgia and fibromyalgia, conditions that cause her pain, spasms and stiffness.

Doctors prescribed her opiates and other strong pharmaceuticals including morphine, diazepam, gabapentin and carbamazepine, but the drugs left her bed bound, sedated and unable to look after her children. Her partner had to step in to become her full-time carer.

She turned to **cannabis** to see if it would help and found her pain was manageable and that she could start living again. "It meant I could get up in the morning, get the kids dressed and take them to school. It made such a difference," she said.

Ms Ross could not get a reliable supply of **cannabis** on the black market in Lerwick so started ordering the drug online. Police dogs then discovered one of her packages in the post, which resulted in the raid on her house.

"It was a horrible experience. I was so scared. The police were not very nice and there were sniffer dogs going through the house as though I was dealing.

"They were searching everywhere, even the kids' bedrooms and treating me like I had done the worst crime ever. How was I supposed to explain that to my children?"

Ms Ross said that she was also left in fear that social workers might try to take her children.

"I was also private renting and worried about my landlord finding out and making me homeless. It was so stressful. In the end I was charged with possession of only 13 grams of **cannabis** and **cannabis** resin, which is about three days' supply of my medicine," she said.

"In the mainland you would get a warning for that small amount but here I got two charges and a fine for a first-time offence."

Ms Ross said that she pleaded guilty by post because she could not face going to court or the battle to argue her case. "I was quite naive then. Now I know more and if it happened again I might fight it but at the time I just wanted it over with."

After the police raid, Ms Ross tried to get an NHS prescription but it "went nowhere".

"They said the only thing that medical **cannabis** is prescribed for is MS and epilepsy." She said that she had to return to buying **cannabis** illegally off the street.

Ms Ross has now been taken on to a medical **cannabis** trial so has a private prescription and is sent medical-grade **cannabis** at a subsidised price.

She said: "The reliability of it has helped me get off the pharmas and now I don't have to worry about the police and social workers. And my children have noticed an improvement in me.

"The new **cannabis** card is a good step in the right direction. Not everyone can afford a prescription but they shouldn't be criminalised for wanting to feel well."

Stumbling blocks

Britain's medical establishment has been reluctant to prescribe **cannabis** on the NHS until the efficacy of the drug has been proven in clinical trials.

However, the pharmaceutical industry has been resistant to investing in trials because the **cannabis** plant cannot be patented.

GW Pharmaceuticals, based in Cambridge, is the only company to receive regulatory approval to sell **cannabis** medicines, Sativex for multiple sclerosis and Epidiolex for childhood epilepsy.

Nonetheless, people with several other illnesses, such as arthritis, Parkinson's disease and depression, report that **cannabis** can alleviate their symptoms. Some cancer patients also report the drug can help with the side-effects of treatment, such as nausea caused by chemotherapy.

To help to widen the evidence base, the government plans to sponsor trials into **cannabis** medicines but the results are not expected for years.

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