

Australia cautiously enters medical marijuana market

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At a secret location in Australia's southeast, Peter Crook delicately tends to a two-month-old cannabis cutting.

Barely knee high, it is one of about 50 government-sanctioned "mother plants" to be cloned for future generations of crops for the country's fledgling medicinal marijuana industry.

"I think we'll see Australia punch above its weight, both in agriculture research as well as medical technology," says Crook, the chief executive of Cann Group Limited, the firm granted Australia's first commercial grower's licence.

"As different conditions come online we are going to see the market grow rapidly."

Following Canada, Israel, and more than half the US states, who through varying approaches have legalised medicinal marijuana, Australia has signalled its intention for a homegrown industry.

But a patchwork of regulations that guard access for many desperate patients, and a lack of confidence among doctors in prescribing the drug, are acting as impediments.

While recreational marijuana use remains illegal in Australia laws passed last year permit medical use, with a dozen licences since issued, ranging from cultivation and research to manufacturing.

At least 10 sector-related firms have listed on Australia's stock exchange, while tens of millions of dollars has been pledged for clinical trials investigating treatment for conditions including epilepsy and relief for the terminally ill.

Driven by a growing recognition of treatment for chronic pain, arthritis and migraines, the global market is estimated to reach US\$55.8 billion by 2025 with the US, Canada and Israel leading the way, US-based analyst Grand View Research

says.

'Conservative government'

But unlike those markets, which have liberal patient-access, Australia has a "very conservative government" that wants a regulatory framework in place up front, says Adam Miller, founder of [medical cannabis](#) start-up BuddingTech.

"They're doing things by the book so that when they have the evidence required to satisfy not only Australia's but other countries' governments, and medical bodies, they will be able to export those products to those countries," he added.

Last year, researchers at the University of Sydney estimated a legal domestic medical market would initially be worth more than Aus\$100 million (US\$75 million) a year.

Miller, who was drawn to the industry after researching alternatives for his seriously-ill mother, says unlocking the local market requires easing patient access and educating doctors.

But not at the expense of the pharmaceutical industry's integrity.

"Any new products that are going to be distributed to a large number of patients need to go through the same mechanism that any other drug would go through, and cannabis is no different," he says.

Doctors acknowledge the plant's potential in palliative care, epilepsy and spasticity but remain guarded in its broader use, citing limited scientific proof.

"It's been around since pre-history and if it was the panacea for a whole range of medical conditions it was claimed to be by some advocates, then we would have been using it for a long period of time," says Australian Medical Association president

'Pretty angry pretty quickly'

But for many, change is too slow.

Arielle Harding had her first epileptic seizure at 15-months-old. Suffering from about 100 a day, treatment with traditional drugs made things worse.

Her desperate parents recently tried small doses of Cannabidiol, or CBD, a non-psychoactive marijuana derivative in liquid form and Arielle, now five, shows few signs of her condition.

"At first we were just overjoyed that that had happened but you also find that you get pretty angry pretty quickly, when you realise that we could have had this three years ago and what a difference that would that have made," her father Tim recalls.

The legal CBD oil he purchases is not an elixir, but like thousands seeking cannabis treatment in Australia, Harding says he is unable to explore the drug further for fear of breaking complicated laws.

A 2015 Roy Morgan poll found more than 90 percent of Australians support legalising marijuana for the seriously ill, but advocates say it struggles for recognition because of its "demonised" past.

"It is really important to realise that you can get the medicinal benefits from cannabinoids without necessarily being intoxicated," says Iain McGregor, academic director at the University of Sydney's cannabis research hub.

"We can actually pull apart the intoxicating recreational effects from the therapeutic effects, and again that allows doctors to prescribe with more confidence if it is a non-intoxicating cannabinoid."

As attitudes change, encouraging more research, McGregor is optimistic about the plant's potential "to produce incredible therapeutics for a whole range of diseases that are currently very difficult to treat".

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