

Epileptic girl challenges Mexico medical marijuana ban

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Just eight years old, Graciela could become Mexico's first authorized consumer of medical marijuana to alleviate the hundreds of epileptic seizures that strike her small frame every day.

A judge last month gave her desperate parents permission to get a cannabis oil despite the government's opposition in a country engulfed in a bloody drug war.

Her parents have tried a slew of treatments, including brain surgery, to ease their daughter's pain, but nothing has worked and her condition has worsened.

They now hope that cannabidiol (CBD), a cannabis compound, can finally help her—if they can get it.

Grace, who lives in the northern industrial hub of Monterrey, has a severe form of epilepsy known as the Lennox-Gastaut syndrome.

The brown-eyed girl moves around in a pink wheelchair, with her parents tending to her every need.

"When she was a year and half, Grace would say 'mommy' and she drank through a straw. Now she doesn't say a word, she takes a baby bottle and she crawls," her mother, Mayela Benavides, told AFP.

"She's like a baby, but one who weighs 18 kilos (40 pounds) and is 1.15

meters (3.8 feet) tall," said Benavides, a 34-year-old engineer whose life revolves around caring for her daughter.

Government opposition

Despite surgery and alternative treatments, including equine therapy, her epileptic fits "have greatly grown in intensity, force and frequency, with 400 episodes (per day), without counting those she endures while sleeping," her mother said.

Grace's parents were losing hope until they learned about a child in the US state of Colorado whose epilepsy improved thanks to cannabidiol.

Her father, Raul Elizalde, drove 2,000 kilometers to Colorado to get the medication.

But he was not allowed to buy it because he was not a resident of Colorado, which is among several US states that have legalized recreational or [medical marijuana](#).

President Enrique Pena Nieto, whose government is fighting drug cartels in a conflict that has left tens of thousands dead in less than a decade, opposes any legalization.

Yet, legalization is making some headway elsewhere in Latin America.

Uruguay has created a regulated market for pot while Chile's lower-chamber of congress backed legislation in July to legalize the cultivation of marijuana for recreational and medical use.

Despite Mexico's prohibition, Grace's parents requested a permit from the health ministry, which said no.

The family's attorney took their case to court and, in a historic ruling, a federal judge ruled in their favor on August 17, allowing them to import cannabidiol.

"A girl has removed the first brick from the wall of the absurd prohibition in Mexico," said Fernando Belaunzaran, a former leftist lawmaker who championed a failed bid to legalize medicinal marijuana.

He said her case could set a precedent for people who want such treatments for other illnesses such as cancer and multiple sclerosis.

"It has been demonstrated time and again that many components of [marijuana](#) are effective" to alleviate Lennox-Gastaut syndrome, said Gady Zabicky, a psychiatrist who wrote a recommendation to the judge who ruled in Grace's case.

But Grace's legal battle is not over if the attorney general's office seeks to overturn the judge's ruling, said the family's lawyer, Fabian Aguinaco.

'Life companion'

The [attorney general](#)'s office, contacted by AFP, declined to say whether it has filed a challenge in the case or would do so before a Friday deadline.

While the legal battle is fought on the sidelines, Grace's family tries to soothe her epileptic convulsions.

Her mother dresses her, changes her diapers and gives her medicine.

The few times that Grace smiles, it is a sign that she is about to have another shock through her body. During the worst spasms, her body stiffens, her eyes move wildly from side to side and her breathing

becomes difficult.

Her family fills the moments between crises with love and games, with Grace's younger sister, Valentina, often by her side.

When they go to the pool or go for a stroll, she musters the strength to clap.

"She's my life companion," Benavides said. "It's painful to see her suffering."

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