

Colombia rethinks drug policy with medical marijuana

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Every year Colombian mother Ines Cano celebrates her daughter's birthday by getting a butterfly tattoo, her way of giving thanks that little Luna has survived another year of chronic epilepsy.

Ines is up to 12 tattoos now, and is hopeful of adding many more thanks to the [medical marijuana](#) treatments she says have changed their lives, and which Colombia is now in the process of legalizing and regulating.

The 12 tattoos could also represent the number of anti-seizure medications she tried previously, to little effect.

"Every day Luna had seizures when she woke up and went to sleep. She could convulse for one or two hours," said Ines, who carried her developmentally delayed daughter on her back for seven years until she learned to walk.

"Seizures are pain, anguish, powerlessness. It's a phantom that grabs you. But [cannabis](#) made her feel better. Luna started recognizing colors, feeding herself, became more independent."

Since January Ines has been giving Luna one drop of cannabis extract every night. The changes have been dramatic, the 36-year-old mother told AFP at their home in Medellin.

"By the ninth day, she stopped having seizures, as if it were a miracle. That's why I think it's important, especially in this country, which has so

much fertile land, to take advantage of that little plant," she said.

Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer, has a difficult history with drugs.

Drug trafficking has given rise to horrific violence by drug cartels such as slain kingpin Pablo Escobar's, which was based in the same city where Ines and Luna live. It has also fueled a five-decade armed conflict that has killed more than 220,000 people.

Colombia has been a close ally in the US war on drugs, deploying the military to combat drug traffickers and taking aggressive measures to destroy illegal crops.

But in a move to ease its drug policies, the government announced last month it would fully legalize medical marijuana and regulate its production, distribution, sale and export.

President Juan Manuel Santos is due to sign a decree any day now putting the new policy in effect.

'China of cannabis'

It is currently legal to grow up to 20 [cannabis plants](#) in Colombia, and medical marijuana is already available.

But the new policy will make it much easier to access it.

"It will make it easier to buy, sell and process it," said Luna's doctor Paola Pineda.

Pineda, a vocal proponent of fully legalizing medical marijuana, said her activism began when she saw what patients were going through to access

such treatments.

"It seemed very harsh to me that families would separate, sell everything they had in Colombia to travel to another country in search of that therapeutic opportunity, when we had it right here," she said.

Producers of medical marijuana currently operate small firms through the loopholes of a 1986 law that legalized cannabis for therapeutic purposes.

The new decree will allow them to offer high-quality products on a much larger scale, said Mauricio Garcia, co-founder of medical marijuana company Cannalivio.

The firm launched eight years ago, taking advantage of what Garcia calls "voids" in the 1986 law. Today it sells not only medication but oils, ointments and even a lip balm made with pot.

But with Colombia's fertile soil and tropical climate they could do much more, said Garcia, a civil engineer by training.

"In other countries, (medical marijuana) is grown completely inside, with artificial lights, irrigation and fertilizer systems," he said.

"Colombia could become the China of cannabis."

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