

Medical marijuana legal in Poland but still rare

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The little boy shakes his hands violently to and fro, but the involuntary motion eases within minutes after his mother puts the syrupy, honey-brown oil into his mouth: medicinal marijuana.

Krzysztof is a playful, smiling five-year-old Polish boy with Down's syndrome. His parents say they owe his life to the medical cannabis oil they began giving him two years ago.

A new law came into force on Tuesday allowing Poles to use stronger medicinal marijuana than the kind authorised so far—but critics say few may see the benefits of it.

In Krzysztof's case, conventional drugs had failed to ease the more than 200 epileptic seizures a day that left him weak, exhausted and gasping for breath.

"Two years ago we tried medical marijuana as a last resort after everything else had failed to relieve our son's violent seizures, and he began to improve from the very first day," Krzysztof's father, Artur Schewe, told AFP.

"We were overjoyed because just days earlier we had been preparing for our son to die," said the bearded and bespectacled 52-year-old insurance salesman.

Tender palliative care

The Schewes have been giving Krzysztof cannabis oil that is already legal in Poland.

"We've seen incredible benefits," says his mother Dorota, adding that his seizures have dropped by "around 80 percent".

"Krzysztof has become much more active, he started to laugh and to cry, he plays, he can concentrate and his immune system is stronger so he's much more healthy."

The cannabis oil the Schewes have been using has a high concentration of Cannabidiol, or CBD—an anti-inflammatory agent which is derived from marijuana plants but does not cause patients to get high.

The oil has only minute traces of psychoactive tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC.

THC is regarded as more effective in the treatment of chronic pain, post-traumatic stress and in palliative care.

The new law that took effect on Tuesday grants Poles the right to use medical marijuana with higher concentrations of high-inducing THC.

But the Schewes along with other medical marijuana activists, physicians and legislators argue that shortcomings in the new legislation mean few patients will be able to access or afford it.

Only imported marijuana

Doctor Marek Bachanski, a paediatric neurologist, who has pioneered

Poland's use of medical marijuana to treat epilepsy in children, says the new legislation comes with several hurdles.

"Polish patients will have very limited access to this type of treatment because we don't produce medical marijuana domestically," he told AFP.

Legislation passed by Poland's right wing-dominated parliament in June rules out recreational use. It allows cannabis-based drugs with high concentrations of THC to be made, on prescription, in Polish pharmacies using only imported marijuana.

Although imports are likely to be more costly, conservative Polish lawmakers feared that allowing domestic marijuana cultivation would open the door to legalising recreational marijuana, a move they oppose.

According to Bachanski, there is already "not enough medical marijuana imported from The Netherlands" and that adequate supplies "will only arrive next year."

Lack of marijuana knowledge

Bachanski also says "just a handful" of Polish doctors really know how to use medical marijuana to treat patients.

Polish pharmacists also lack the knowledge and equipment to fill prescriptions for various types of medical marijuana, Bachanski adds.

Under EU rules, patients who are unable to fill their prescriptions in Poland, are entitled to do so in one of the bloc's 13 other member states where medical marijuana is legal.

Critics, however, warn that the higher costs of seeking medicine abroad

could make this unaffordable for many Poles.

They want further legislation to allow domestic production and processing of medical marijuana to bring down costs and guarantee access.

Poland's Health Minister Konstanty Radziwill insists such concerns are overstated. He points to dozens of patients, especially children, already getting special funding and import permits for medical marijuana on a case-by-case basis.

Rapper-MP proposes bill

Piotr Krzysztof Liroy-Marzec, a Polish rapper turned member of parliament, has been the driving legislative force behind legal [medical marijuana](#) in Poland.

After a 2015 survey found that 78 percent of Poles favoured legalisation of medical cannabis, Liroy tabled legislation to do just that in February 2016.

But his draft was heavily amended to rule out domestic production before being passed this June by parliament, dominated by the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party.

Eyeing the global multi-billion dollar boom in medical and recreational marijuana, the bearded and heavily tattooed 46-year-old Liroy says he now intends to table fresh legislation allowing "Poland to grow our own [marijuana](#) and send our medicine around the globe."

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