

In Brazil, an NGO grows medical cannabis to help patients

September 24 2021, by Eugenia Logiuratto



Brazilian agronomist Diogo Mantovanelli inspects cannabis plants at the Medical Cannabis Research and Patient Support Association (APEPI) production farm in Paty dos Alferes, Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil on September 9, 2021.

Surrounded by barbed wire and an electric fence, marijuana plants

flourish under the bright sun on a farm in a mountainous area outside Rio de Janeiro.

But this [farm](#) has nothing to do with drug trafficking. It belongs, in fact, to a pioneering Brazilian NGO engaged in the production of medical cannabis to help patients with seizures.

Margarete Brito, a lawyer by training, first started growing cannabis several years ago to relieve the seizures of her daughter Sofia, now 12, who is suffering from epilepsy.

After seeing her condition improve, Brito decided to help other patients too. So she founded the Medical Cannabis Research and Patient Support Association, or Apepi, that produces artisanal therapeutic oils made from cannabis to help patients with conditions similar to her daughter's.

That work has required a lot of effort, since growing marijuana remains illegal in Brazil.

"If we follow the letter of the law, nothing authorizes us to do that," Brito told AFP.

But she and her husband, Marcos Langenbach, were able to obtain an unprecedented judicial authorization to cultivate cannabis for medical purposes in 2016.

Today, their farm—about two hours by car from the Brazilian capital—has 2,000 plants growing there to help patients with severe autism, multiple sclerosis and epilepsy.



Brazilian lawyer and founder of the Medical Cannabis Research and Patient Support Association (Apepi) Margarete Brito shows a fridge containing medicinal cannabis oil at Apepi headquarters.

And despite initial suspicion and pushback from some, Brito says the endeavor enjoys support in Brazil.

"We have real social legitimacy. That's what protects us," Brito said.

- 'People have prejudices'-

On a recent visit to the farm, which is protected by an [electric fence](#) and barbed wire, agricultural engineer Diogo Fonseca made his way among marijuana plants growing in large black pots and marked with the names

of their different varieties: Purple Wreck, Schanti, Doctor, Harle Tsu, Solar, CBG.

These plants are used to produce therapeutic oils that meet the individual needs of each patient, depending on whether they require a higher or lower dose of cannabidiol (CBD), a non-psychoactive substance with a relaxing effect.

Using a pocket microscope, the Fonseca examines each plant to assess the ideal time to pick.



A view of medicinal cannabis oil at the Apepi production farm.

In April, armed police with sniffer dogs raided the farm, after a person who had worked on renovating its laboratory reported Apepi to the authorities.

"A lot of people have prejudices," Brito said. "We explain how our project works to everyone, but this person believed that we were drug traffickers and informed against us," said Manoel Caetano, the farm's manager.

The police eventually realized the farm was a medical cannabis plantation, apologized and left, according to Brito.

More accessible

Apepi has forged partnerships with respected scientific institutions, such as the Fiocruz Foundation and the University of Campinas. And it has grown has fivefold over the past two years and now counts 1,500 members.

Among them is Gabriel Guerra, 19, who suffers from a severe form of autism and cerebral palsy. When he was eight, he would have 60 seizures a day. "But when he started to take the custom oil"—a few drops three times a day—"the attacks stopped. He started to have more independence, looking for ways to communicate," explained his father Ricardo Guerra.



Cannabis plants are seen at the Apepi farm, which uses them to make therapeutic oil to help patients with seizures and other conditions.



Gabriel Guerra (C) is held by his mother, Vanessa Opitz, while his father Ricardo Guerra gives him medicinal cannabis in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in September 2021.

Thanks to Apepi, the products have become much more accessible to patients: 150 reais (\$28) for a 30 ml bottle, while imported products can cost anywhere from 600 to 3,000 reais (\$113 to \$565).

Apepi is now awaiting a court decision which they hope would allow the farm to increase its production to 10,000 plants starting next year.

But the group is not very optimistic about the prospect of legalization of medical cannabis any time soon—President Jair Bolsonaro has already indicated that he would veto a bill being debated in Congress.

© 2021 AFP

Citation: In Brazil, an NGO grows medical cannabis to help patients (2021, September 24)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-09-brazil-ngo-medical-cannabis-patients.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.