

Cannabis-Based Medicine Prescriptions Double in 12 Months

Prescriptions for Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicinal Products in England Double in a Year

According to the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) latest report, the number of cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPMs) prescribed on the NHS was so small that reporting details "could potentially breach patient confidentiality."

Prescriptions for unlicensed CBPMs more than doubled in England between 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, as revealed by the CQC data. The report, titled 'The Safer Management of Controlled Drugs: Annual Update 2023', highlighted that 177,566 items were prescribed between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023, compared with 81,476 items dispensed in a community setting between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2022.

"Almost all" of these items were dispensed in private clinics, the report noted, adding that the number of CBPMs prescribed on the NHS was "so small that this could potentially breach patient confidentiality".

Significant Increase in Prescriptions

Since the legislation changed in 2018 to allow the prescribing of CBPMs, the CQC reported a "significant increase in prescribing to treat a wide range of medical conditions, as well as changing models of care, including those involving non-medical prescribers".

"People can also find it difficult to access joined-up care from all their healthcare providers," the report said. "The number of unlicensed CBPMs prescribed each year continues to increase by at least 100% annually."

The report recommended a multi-agency review of the impact of these changes.

Challenges in NHS Prescribing

Since medical cannabis was legalized, only three CBPMs have been approved for use, leading to concerns about the lack of NHS prescribing of CBPMs. In February 2024, the National Institute for Health and Care Research confirmed that there were no ongoing government-backed trials of CBPMs. At the time of the CQC report's publication on July 11, 2024, there were 22 CQC-registered providers that prescribe unlicensed CBPMs in England.

Industry Insights

Mike Barnes, founder of the Medical Cannabis Clinicians Society and Cannabis Industry Council, commented on the growing awareness and demand for medical cannabis. "Awareness is slowly going up in the general population and there are now over 40 clinics and about 140 doctors meeting the increased

demand.”

Barnes explained that the total number of prescriptions does not equate to the total number of patients. “Doctors can only write prescriptions for one month, and that quantity prescribed may just last the one month or sometimes longer if the product is ‘as required’. Thus, [there are] more prescriptions per annum than patients. Our best estimate of the total patient number is now about 45,000. That total is also slowly going up by about 1,000 per month.”

Barnes added that the low number of NHS prescriptions for unlicensed products “doesn’t surprise me as there is so much more the government could do”.

“We are hopeful that the new government may be more amenable to opening the NHS market than the last government.”

Calls for a Multi-Agency Review

Wing Tang, head of professional standards at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, expressed support for a multi-agency review to assess the current system’s ability to provide appropriate and equitable access to unlicensed CBMPs for both NHS and private patients in cases where existing licensed medicines are inadequate.

“We would be glad to contribute to such a review,” Tang stated.

The doubling of prescriptions for unlicensed cannabis-based medicinal products in England reflects a growing acceptance and demand for these treatments. However, the disparity between NHS and private clinic prescriptions highlights ongoing challenges in access and regulation. A multi-agency review could be a crucial step in ensuring that patients receive the best possible care and that the benefits of medical cannabis are fully realized.

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