THE HON SUSSAN LEY MP
Minister for Health
Minister for Aged Care
Minister for Sport

MEDIA RELEASE

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Turnbull Govt delivers medicinal cannabis ‘missing piece’

The Turnbull Government will seek parliamentary support to allow the controlled cultivation of cannabis for medicinal or scientific purposes in Australia to deliver patients access to a safe, legal and sustainable supply of locally-produced products for the first-time.

Minister for Health Sussan Ley today announced that the Government was currently in the process of finalising draft amendments to the Narcotics Drugs Act 1967 to allow the controlled cultivation of cannabis for medicinal and scientific purposes in Australia.

Ms Ley also announced the Government would create a Commonwealth licensing scheme within the Department of Health to ensure cultivation meets Australia’s international obligations.

Ms Ley said allowing controlled cultivation locally would provide the critical “missing piece” for the Commonwealth to enable a sustainable supply of a safe medicinal cannabis product to Australian patients in the future.

It will also allow the Government to closely manage the supply of medicinal cannabis products from “farm to pharmacy”, Ms Ley said. This will be done in conjunction with necessary state or territory regulations and there will be discussions at the next COAG about how this can progress.

“This Government is incredibly sympathetic to the suffering of those Australians with debilitating illnesses and we want to enable access to the most effective medical treatments available,” Ms Ley said

“Currently there are already systems in place to licence the manufacture and supply of medicinal cannabis-based products in Australia, however there is no mechanism to allow the production of a safe, legal and sustainable local supply.

“This has meant Australian patients, researchers and manufacturers have had to try to access international supplies of legal medicinal cannabis crops and products, but limited supplies and export barriers in other countries have made this difficult.

“Allowing the cultivation of legal medicinal cannabis crops in Australia under strict controls strikes the right balance between patient access, community protection and our international obligations.”

Ms Ley said the Government’s draft amendments would address structural issues identified in the proposed cross-party bill by a recent Senate committee report and hoped they would help progress the matter through Parliament.

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“The Government will consult with the Greens, Labor, Crossbench and states and territories on the draft amendments before bringing a final version to Parliament by the end of the year.”

Amending Australia’s Narcotic Drugs Act is necessary to allow Commonwealth licensing of the cultivation of cannabis in Australia for medicinal or scientific purposes, given Australia’s international obligations under the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961.

Australia is a signatory to the Convention, which requires that production, manufacture, export, import, distribution, trade and possession of narcotic drugs such as cannabis is restricted exclusively to medical and scientific purposes.

Cultivation in Australia without amendments to the Narcotic Drugs Act will see Australia in breach of the international Convention.

The Commonwealth licensing scheme will set out the obligations and legislative framework requirements for states and territories looking to set up agricultural industries around the cultivation of cannabis for medicinal or scientific purposes.

“It’s imperative we have a clear national licensing system to ensure we maintain the integrity of crops for medicinal or scientific purposes.

“It allows us to closely manage the supply of medicinal cannabis products from farm to pharmacy.

“We also want to make sure that this approval and monitoring process for cultivation isn’t fragmented across different jurisdictions and provides regulatory consistency.”

Ms Ley said supply of unregistered medicinal cannabis products for clinical trials and specific patients would continue to be managed in accordance with current provisions under the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989.

Ms Ley said the registration of new medicinal cannabis products would also continue to be regulated by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), in the same way other new medical drugs and devices were.

“It’s important we maintain the same high safety standards for medicinal cannabis products that we apply to any other medicine” Ms Ley said.

“I’m sure Australians would be concerned if we allowed medicinal cannabis products to be subject to lower safety standards than common prescription painkillers or cholesterol medications.”

Ms Ley said it was important to make clear today’s announcement was not a debate about the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use.

Nor was it a discussion about making medicinal cannabis products available over the counter without it being first prescribed through a doctor or through a clinical trial, Ms Ley said.

“At the end of the day, cannabis is classified as an illegal drug in Australia for recreational use and we have no plans to change that,” Ms Ley said.

“In many cases the long-term evidence is not yet complete about the ongoing use of various medicinal cannabis products and it’s therefore important we maintain the role of medical professionals to monitor and authorise its use.”

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