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Q&A: WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence review of cannabis

The WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence (ECDD) just held a special session on cannabis. Why is this important?

It was the first time the [WHO ECDD](#) reviewed cannabis and cannabis-related substances to consider the appropriateness of their current scheduling within the International Drug Control Conventions.

The Committee, which met from 4-7 June 2018, conducted a pre-review of cannabis-related substances that are currently subject to international control:

- Cannabis plant (e.g. marijuana) and cannabis resin (e.g. hashish)
- Extracts and tinctures of cannabis (oils, edibles, liquids)
- Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) e.g. dronabinol
- Isomers of THC

The ECDD also conducted a critical review of preparations considered to be pure cannabidiol (CBD), a major component of the plant.

What is the difference between a pre-review and a critical review?

A pre-review is the first step of the ECDD's assessment process, where it is determined whether there is enough robust scientific information to proceed to the next step, called a critical review. This initial evaluation is also an opportunity to identify gaps in the available scientific data.

A critical review is carried out when there is sufficient scientific evidence to allow the ECDD to make informed an recommendation that the substance be placed under international control, or if its level of control should be changed.

Substances under control are regulated by the International Drug Control Conventions, which restrict international production and trade of these substances. Individual countries can exercise discretion in how they will apply controls within their territories. This is why the use of cannabis for medical purposes is legalised in some countries, while it is not in others.

What did the ECDD decide?

The Committee made two main decisions:

1. There was sufficient evidence to proceed to a critical review of cannabis and related substances at the next ECDD meeting in November 2018.
2. The ECDD recommended that preparations considered to be pure cannabidiol (CBD) not be placed under international drug control as the substance was not found to have psychoactive properties, and presents no potential for abuse or dependence.

Does this mean that cannabis-related substances should be available for medical use?

The ECDD is an independent group of experts in the field of drug dependence convened by WHO. Its role is not to recommend the use of substances for medical treatment, but rather to advise on the scheduling of substances based on evaluations of potential for harm, dependence and abuse from a public health perspective, as well as their therapeutic usefulness.

WHO then makes recommendations to the UN Secretary General, and the decision whether to adopt the recommendations is subject to a vote by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

What information did the ECDD consider when making their decisions?

WHO commissioned reviews of each cannabis-related substance from scientific experts in five different disciplines: chemistry, pharmacology, toxicology, epidemiology, and therapeutic use. The experts were selected through a rigorous screening process in accordance with WHO procurement guidelines and on the basis of demonstrated extensive knowledge of and expertise in the subject. Selection criteria were also designed to ensure balanced geographic and gender representation. In accordance with WHO policy, all experts were asked to disclose potential conflicts of interest.

All Member States were invited to submit relevant information to the ECDD through a specially designed questionnaire to gather insights into the legitimate use, harmful use, status of national control, and potential impact of international control for each substance under evaluation.

The ECDD meeting also included an Open Session at which representatives of civil society, patient groups, academics and commercial parties had the opportunity to share their views and experiences regarding the uses of cannabis for the Committee's consideration.

Why had cannabis never been reviewed until now?

The ECDD acts in accordance with International Drug Control Conventions that identify criteria to schedule or propose rescheduling of substances under control. Within these Conventions, there has until recently been limited robust scientific information about the

health effects of cannabis for the ECDD to consider its review. As more Member States permit the use of cannabis for medical and non-medical purposes, more evidence is emerging about their health effects. The ECDD determined that there is now enough information to conduct a full review of cannabis and its related substances.

When is the ECDD expected to make its recommendations on the scheduling of cannabis?

The next ECDD meeting will be held in November 2018. At that time, the Committee will undertake critical reviews of cannabis and related substances.

The meeting will also be an opportunity to review several New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) like synthetic cannabinoids and fentanyl-analogues, as well as medicines such as tramadol and pregabalin.

** The ECDD is an independent group of experts in the field of drug dependence convened by WHO to review the potential for abuse, dependence and harm to health of psychoactive substances. The Committee makes recommendations on whether or not psychoactive substances should be placed under international control or if their level of control should be changed. The recommendations are then presented by the Director General of WHO to the UN Secretary General and the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND).*

Related links:

- <http://www.who.int/features/qa/cannabidiol/en/>
- For more information: ecddsecretariat@who.int