

Statement to Parliament: Home Secretary statement on medical use of cannabis

With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the medical use of cannabis.

Over the weekend, I issued an emergency licence to allow Billy Caldwell's medical team to access cannabis-based medicine to treat life-threatening seizures caused by a severe form of epilepsy.

This was an emergency procedure which was led by a senior clinician with the support of the Medical Director at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital.

I am pleased to say Billy has now been discharged from hospital. It is now for his senior clinicians to develop a long-term care plan.

I'm sure the whole House would like to join me in expressing my sympathy for Billy and his family who have been going through a very difficult time.

The course of action in this case was unprecedented.

There is strong scientific evidence that cannabis is a drug which can harm people's mental and physical health, and damage communities.

There are currently no legally recognised medicinal or therapeutic benefits.

To date, under successive governments, Home Office policy has been to permit the production, supply and possession of raw cannabis solely for research purposes under a Home Office licence.

The cannabis-based medicine Sativex can however be prescribed in the UK because there is a proven case for its safety and efficacy.

However, cases like Billy's, Alfie Dingley's and others like it, have shown that we need to look more closely at the use of cannabis-based medicine in the healthcare sector in the UK.

Because it has become clear to me since becoming Home Secretary that the position that we find ourselves in currently is not satisfactory.

It's not satisfactory for the parents, it's not satisfactory for the doctors, and it's not satisfactory for me.

Review

I have now come to the conclusion that it is time to review the scheduling of cannabis.

Before I go into any detail of the review, let me be absolutely clear that this step is in no way a first step to the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use.

This government has absolutely no plans to legalise cannabis and the penalties for unauthorised supply and possession will remain unchanged.

We will not set a dangerous precedent or weaken our ability to keep dangerous drugs off our streets.

The approach that we will be asking the review to consider will be no different than that which has been used before for other controlled drugs where there is evidence of medical benefits.

The government review will take place in 2 parts.

Part one of the commission will consider the evidence available for the medicinal and therapeutic benefits of cannabis-based medicines.

Professor Sally Davies, who also serves as the Chief Medical Officer, will take this part forward.

This would then inform exactly which forms of cannabis or cannabis-based medicines should be taken forward in Part 2.

Part 2 will be led by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD).

The ACMD will not reassess the evidence issued by Professor Sally Davies, but will provide an assessment, based on the balance of harms and public health needs, of what, if anything, should be rescheduled.

If the review identified that there are significant medical benefits then we do intend to reschedule.

We have seen in recent months that there is a pressing need to allow those who might benefit from cannabis-based products to access them.

It will of course take time for Professor Sally Davies and the ACMD to complete their work and for the government to consider their recommendations.

Expert panel

In the short term, the Policing Minister announced yesterday that the government will be establishing an expert panel of clinicians to advise ministers on any applications to prescribe cannabis-based medicines.

This is intended to ensure that advice to ministers on licensing in these cases is clinically led, based firmly upon medical evidence and is as swift as possible.

The chief medical officers across the UK have been actively working together already, and the expert panel will be able to start considering applications within a week.

Earlier today, the Policing Minister also spoke to Alfie Dingley's mum Hannah Deacon, and informed her that we will issue a licence for Alfie later today.

All of the work I have outlined today is about making sure that we keep in step with the latest scientific evidence and that patients and their families have access to the most appropriate course of medical treatment.

And I would like to pay tribute to the Policing Minister for all of his excellent and sustained work on this important issue.

As a father, I know there is nothing worse than seeing your child suffer.

You would do anything to take away their pain.

Utmost sympathy

That is why I have the utmost sympathy for Billy Caldwell, Alfie Dingley and others like them, and for their parents who have been under unimaginable stress and strain.

I know that they are following a gut parental instinct to do whatever is in their power to try and alleviate their child's suffering.

And today I would like to say to this House that I will do everything in my power to make sure that we have a system that works so that these children and these parents get access to the best medical treatment.

I commend this statement to the House.