

NSW Cannabis Medicines Advisory Service



The Cannabis Medicines Advisory Service was established to provide expert advice and support to NSW doctors considering prescribing a cannabis medicine for their patients.

The Service is part of the NSW Government \$21 million commitment to advance our understanding for the safe use of cannabis medicines to treat serious and debilitating symptoms.

All cannabis medicines in Australia need to meet a quality standard to ensure they are free from contaminants and are manufactured to a consistent standard. However, high quality evidence on the efficacy of these medicines is still limited and with one exception, products currently available in Australia are not registered on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG). Detailed evidence about the efficacy, safety and quality of a medicine is required for registration.

Unregistered medicines, including cannabis medicines, can be prescribed. However, information about dosing, side effects, adverse events and contraindications for their use is not readily available. For this reason, and to protect the safety of patients, unregistered medicines, including cannabis medicines, are treated as experimental drugs and require approval for use.

Prescribing unregistered medicines

As part of their application to prescribe an unregistered cannabis medicine, doctors need to describe what evidence-based treatments and registered medicines they have already tried.

They need to provide information about why they think it is appropriate to trial an unregistered medicine and how potential side effects and other risks will be monitored and managed. They are asked to provide scientific evidence supporting their application.

Sourcing the necessary information can be difficult. Research into how an unregistered cannabis medicine is absorbed, its effects on a person and how it interacts with other medicines may be absent or very limited. Early research may provide limited and sometimes contradictory results. It can be time-consuming and difficult for medical practitioners to research the literature and product and to keep up with scientific developments.

The new Cannabis Medicines Advisory Service will help doctors to manage this uncertainty. The Service includes a telephone hotline that doctors can call to discuss their patient's condition, what treatments they have attempted and why they think a cannabis medicine would be a suitable next step.

Supporting doctors as further evidence emerges

The Service can provide doctors with up-to-date information about managing the symptoms their patient is experiencing, and any clinical trials using cannabis medicines that might be relevant. Doctors can get advice on factors in a patient's medical history that should be considered as part of the decision to use a cannabis medicine. The Service can provide information about different product formulations and why one may be more suitable than another as well as dosing regimens. Practicalities such as how potential therapeutic effects should be measured and side effects monitored and reported on can be discussed.

By drawing on other clinical and research networks, the Service can help doctors ensure their patients are referred to and receiving best-practice quality care. As part of their professional registration, it is expected that a doctor's practise reflects available evidence and professional standards. Practitioners have a responsibility to exercise caution when deciding to prescribe a novel product, and to fully inform and carefully monitor their patient.

The Commonwealth's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has information on the evidence regarding use of cannabis medicines that doctors should consider and has consumer information about these medicines (www.tga.gov.au/sites/default/files/guidance-use-medicinal-cannabis-australia-patient-information.pdf).

A service for every NSW doctor

The Service is providing state-wide support to both specialists and general practitioners. Being headquartered in Hunter New England Health will ensure access to expert clinical advice for both metropolitan and regional practitioners, including those based in rural and remote areas.

Clinical guidance for a range of health conditions

The Service will have a focus on palliative care but is not restricted to this. This initial emphasis reflects the level of interest expressed by palliative care patients and their health practitioners (including GPs) in the potential for cannabis medicines to reduce severe end-of-life symptoms. These patients are also being prioritised as their treatment is particularly time-critical. However, the Service will offer NSW doctors expert clinical advice on the use of cannabis medicines to treat a range of symptoms and conditions.

An integrated approach to cannabis medicines

Cannabis is a complex plant and we still are learning about the many compounds that make up the plant; how they interact with each other and how they affect organs and systems in the human body.

The Service is linked to the Australian Centre for Cannabinoid Clinical and Research Excellence (ACRE), a new facility funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and the NSW Government.

This partnership will develop prescribing protocols to assist doctors with their application for an authority to prescribe a cannabis medicine, as well as collecting standardised information about the safety and efficacy of treatments. This information, together with findings from the NSW Government-funded clinical trials program, will accelerate our knowledge about cannabis medicines and guide future practice.

Your medical practitioner does not have to use the Service

Your doctor does not have to contact the Service before they make an application to NSW Health to prescribe a cannabis medicine. However, if they have not made an application before, it can be helpful if they do so. The Service will be run by medical and pharmacy experts who have a good understanding of what is expected to be provided in applications and steps that should be taken before an application is made. The Service can access other clinical and research experts when further information is needed. Seeking advice first can help ensure any application made by a doctor is appropriate and complete.

The Service is for medical practitioners

The Service is for medical practitioners. Further information about cannabis medicines and NSW Government-funded clinical trials for patients and members of the general public is available through:

- Telephone: Health Direct Help Line **1800 217 257**
- Email: the Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research and Innovation
cmcri@moh.health.nsw.gov.au
- Post: Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research and Innovation
Locked Mail Bag 961
North Sydney NSW 2059