



Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Health

HPRA Report *Cannabis for Medical Use - A Scientific Review*

12:00 Tuesday 7 March 2017

Good afternoon Chairman,

My name is Eugene Lennon, Principal Officer of the Medicines and Controlled Drugs Unit in the Department of Health. I'm joined by my colleagues Maria Egan, Pharmacist in the Medicines and Controlled Drugs Unit, Dr John Devlin, Deputy Chief Medical Officer and Dr Ronan Glynn, Specialist Registrar in Public Health Medicine.

### Background

Members of the Committee will know that cannabis is a Schedule 1, controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act and it is the most widely used illegal drug in Ireland. It is worth remembering that cannabis is not currently an authorised medicine and has not gone through the normal regulatory procedures for medicines which are designed to protect patients and ensure treatments are supported by good evidence of their effectiveness and safety.

However, the Department is aware that some patients believe cannabis should be a treatment option for their medical condition. The Department is also aware that a number of countries have changed the law or introduced programmes to allow access, under strict conditions, for certain groups of patients.

### HPRA Report

Against this background, the Minister for Health announced a review of policy on cannabis for medical use on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November. He requested the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) to provide him with expert advice. On the 10th of February he published the HPRA's report, *Cannabis for Medical Use - A Scientific Review*, and announced that he would establish an access programme for standardised cannabis-based treatments for the following conditions;

- Spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis, resistant to all standard therapies and interventions;
- Intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy, despite the use of standard anti-emetic regimes;
- Severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy that has failed to respond to standard anticonvulsant medications.

The Minister has thanked the HPRA and the members of the Expert Review Group for their work on this report which he described as a "milestone" in the development of policy on medicinal cannabis.

Patients accessing cannabis through the programme will be required to be under the care of a medical consultant.

Officials will consult with stakeholders on how the access programme will operate. It will be important to engage with the clinical community in the development of a framework to operationalise the access programme for the implementation of medicinal cannabis in healthcare. Officials are also examining legislative changes that will be required to underpin the access programme.

The Minister intends to progress the establishment of this access programme as a priority, however, to be clear, patients accessing cannabis through the cannabis access programme will need to be recommended for cannabis treatment by a relevant medical consultant involved in the patient's care. This recognises the relevance of such treatment in the overall care planning and management of the underlying medical condition.

For the period during which this access programme is being established, it remains open to the Minister for Health to grant a licence under the Misuse of Drugs Act for access to cannabis for medical purposes in individual cases. Such applications will be considered on a case by case basis. The granting of a licence must, however, be premised on an appropriate application being submitted to the Department, which is endorsed by a consultant who is responsible for the management of the patient and who is prepared to monitor the effects of the treatment over time.

Thank you Chairman, and we will be happy to address any follow up questions.