

Opening Statement

Fellow TD's and Senators, members of the Oireachtas staff and those who are watching and listening to this briefing, I want to explain the rationale for why I put this bill forward. First and foremost this is about trying to alleviate unnecessary suffering. People may have had prejudged perceptions about the benefits of medicinal cannabis but the situation is constantly evolving into a more enlightened and educated debate. What has driven me as an elected representative over the course of the last nine months has been the personal testimony of the many people who have found themselves in circumstances not of their own choosing. I have given a commitment, and I will honour that commitment, that in my capacity as a TD, I will be their voice in this Dáil.

This Bill, that I published last July, provides for the regulation of cannabis for medicinal use, and, for that purpose, to establish the Cannabis Regulation Authority and the Cannabis Research Institute; to provide for the licensing of the supply of cannabis for medicinal use; and to provide for related matters.

The Bill takes a health-led approach to enabling access to cannabis-based products based on the evidence of the health benefits of doing so. These health benefits are the effectiveness and greater safety of cannabis-based products than many available authorised medicines such as opioids and benzodiazepines which cause serious withdrawal, addiction and fatal overdoses. The Bill supports the drug policy outlined in the current programme for government:

The Programme for a Partnership Government, May 2016 states: "We will support a health-led approach rather than criminal justice approach to drugs use..."

The *Cannabis for Medicinal Use Regulation Bill 2016* is designed to provide for the Regulation of Cannabis for Medicinal use so that: patients can obtain from a pharmacy, with a doctor's recommendation, a legally protected, secure supply of a quality-controlled cannabis-based product, that is effective, and safer than many authorised products, especially for pain-relief.

The Bill allows for legally protected access to Cannabis-based products by patients with a doctor's recommendation in the form of a certificate from their doctor that they suffer from a condition that responds to cannabis-based products. Labelled, quality-assured cannabis-based products would only be available from a licenced Pharmacy. Importation, production, transport and sale could only be carried on under a licence issued by a Cannabis Regulation Authority. Advertising and sponsorship of cannabis-based products would be prohibited. Sale to children would be prohibited. A Research Institute would also be established to improve knowledge about the use of and effects of Cannabis-based medicines.

There are now regulations in at least 9 countries including 4 EU countries, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and the Czech republic, which specifically regulate access to cannabis-based products for medicinal use. Many other countries are examining their laws with a view to a more health-based approach in light of evidence of the effectiveness of cannabis-based products and their relatively favourable adverse effects compared to other more toxic authorised medicines as well as the failure of criminalisation to reduce drug misuse in terms of harm or level of consumption for recreational use. The Bill is based on legislation in the US and EU which attempt to provide legal protection for patients to access a safe supply of cannabis based products from licensed pharmacies on the recommendation of a doctor. It seeks to address concerns about the need for more research by addressing the funding of a Research Institute and the regulation of cannabis products by a Regulation Authority.

Increased numbers of patients using cannabis-based products instead of more toxic alternative authorised medicines will result in a net improvement in the health of the population as a whole. This is borne out in the US where increased use of cannabis for medicinal use has coincided with falling sales and use of more toxic drugs and with a consequent fall in drug overdoses including fatal overdoses. No overall increase in recreational use has been associated with the legalisation of cannabis for medicinal use in the US and youth current cannabis use for recreational purposes is actually falling there. Diversion of regulated products to recreational use (which happens for all authorised drugs with a misuse potential) in the absence of an increase in the overall level of recreational use, does not in itself represent a health concern. This means that this Bill should not be expected to increase recreational use and should be expected to save lives through reducing fatal overdoses from other more toxic drugs. There is no record of any fatal overdose of cannabis and this is a very important strength of the safety profile of cannabis. Doctors and pharmacists should be trusted to advise their patients, as for other more toxic medicines, of the risks and benefits and to recommend caution with populations at risk such as with children. There is nothing in the Bill which prejudges professional judgement or which attempts to influence how doctors or pharmacists carry out their professional duties.