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U.K. Approves Pot-Based Drug: A High or Low for Medical Marijuana?

By [BRUCE WATSON](#)Posted 9:00 AM 06/22/10 | [Company News](#), [Technology](#), [Health Care](#)
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It looks like marijuana sales may be moving from the street corner to the pharmacy in the U.K., where a [drug derived from cannabis](#) went on sale Monday. Sativex, which was developed by GW Pharmaceuticals and will be marketed by Bayer, is intended for multiple-sclerosis patients. It's the world's first prescription drug made from pot, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#), and [Canadian regulators approved its use](#) back in 2005.



Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

British regulators approved the drug Friday. GW Pharmaceuticals also plans to seek approval for Sativex in other countries, including Spain, Germany and Italy. In the U.S., where Phase III (late-stage) clinical trials are set to start later this year, the company hopes to market the drug as a painkiller for cancer patients. Analysts estimate that annual revenues from Sativex will ultimately reach \$74 million to \$148 million.

These massive potential revenues have reignited the controversy over medical marijuana. If the active chemical in pot, tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, has proven its effectiveness for medical purposes in Sativex, could that lend more legitimacy to the idea of using marijuana leaves directly for medical purposes? Or will new pharma-developed drugs like Sativex outcompete marijuana in its original form?

Pricing the Pot Market

First, let's take a look at how Sativex and marijuana would compete on cost. Of course, the current average prices for pot are much higher than they would be if the plant could be widely grown legally, and it's hard to tell exactly what it would cost in that case. Because of its illegality, marijuana cultivation, transportation and sales are fraught with peril. The lack of secure supply chains and the potential cost of run-ins with the law tend to keep black market prices high.

However, a few open markets hint at what the actual market value of marijuana could be. In [Amsterdam](#), for example, prices range from \$1.50 to \$10 per gram, depending upon the quality and origin of the marijuana. In Canada, the per-gram price for [medical marijuana](#) is only \$4.91 (\$5 Canadian).

The overall range, then, is \$1.50 to \$10 per gram for legal marijuana, with \$5 per gram as a workable baseline. In Canada, the standard [daily dose](#) of medical marijuana ranges between 0.5 and 1.5 grams, which would cost roughly \$2.50 to \$7.50 for most patients. By comparison, a basic daily dose of [Sativex](#) costs roughly \$16 per day. And a daily dose of [Marinol](#), a drug containing synthetic THC that's prescribed for AIDS and cancer patients in the U.S., runs between \$9 and \$13.50 per day.

This translates into a monthly price of \$150 for marijuana, \$337 for Marinol and \$480 for Sativex. The comparatively high prices of Sativex and Marinol aren't surprising. In fact, it's a little shocking

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that they don't cost more. Sativex is a processed version of marijuana, which means that its cost is directly tied to the base cost of the plant. Marinol, on the other hand, is a synthesized version of THC and contains far more THC than marijuana. In both cases, the cost of manufacturing massively increases the price that patients -- or health-care providers -- pay.

Challenges to Medical Marijuana

The basic argument against medical marijuana lies in its classification as a Schedule 1 substance, which means that it has a high potential for abuse, that it does not have an accepted medical usage and that there is a lack of accepted safety for its use in a medical setting. This, by the way, puts marijuana in the same class as heroin, LSD and peyote.

But with the increased acceptance of THC-based drugs like Marinol and Sativex, the Schedule 1 argument starts to crumble. In fact, Marinol contains far more THC than standard marijuana, which can provoke some unpleasant reactions. One consumer, Robert Randall, complained, [noting](#): "When I took Marinol, I found it anxiety-provoking and intense, like I had wandered into a short story by Flannery O'Connor." (Sativex avoids this effect with a different chemical composition and delivery system, [GW claims](#).)

Another argument is that pharmaceutical companies can produce THC content with higher consistency and quality than medical marijuana. Critics of medical marijuana question whether actual marijuana can have the consistent THC content necessary for prescription use. Sativex, which is made from medical marijuana cultivated in secret farms around the UK, seems to suggest that marijuana plants can be grown with relatively consistent THC.

Smoked Medication vs Pills

The final key argument against medical marijuana is that it's usually smoked. No medicines that are smoked are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration today, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency [claims](#) that a marijuana cigarette contains four times more cancer-causing tar than a normal cigarette. Then again, other methods of consumption -- including vaporizers, water pipes, and cooked goods -- can reduce or even eliminate the tar problem.

For supporters of medical marijuana, Sativex may seem to be a step backward. After all, the marijuana derivative is yet another stopgap separating sick people from a cheap, common, easily produced medication. Then again, as accepted medications start to draw closer and closer to actual marijuana, the arguments against the "the demon weed" increasingly seem to be going up in smoke.

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Rdhawk70

7:19PM Jun 23 2010

Nothing, a tin-foil hat couldn't cure....

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Williemojorisin

10:55AM Jun 23 2010

dont base your opinion on this crazy woman

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Dvdsn61

10:46AM Jun 23 2010

Money is the reason prohibition failed. There was money to be made in making and selling alcohol. Enough money to corrupt those in charge of enforcing the law. The only problem was, not enough of that money was reaching those at the very top of the totem pole. With taxes, the money was controlled and spent by those at the top. That's why it became legal again!

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Dvdsn61

10:22AM Jun 23 2010

Money is the only motivation needed. If the Feds see that revenue can be made from it, it WILL be legalized sooner or later, it will become legal.

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Dvdsn61

10:19AM Jun 23 2010

State, local, and the federal government have become reliant on taxes that target specific groups. As more people stop smoking cigarettes and using tobacco, they will have to find another group to target for their revenue. Let's hope you aren't in that group, because if you are, you had better lube up.

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RTippe

10:06AM Jun 23 2010

The woman they rescued from the Rockies was there to clear her head after being arrested for a DUI, but it wasn't

alcohol it was pot that get her that ticket.....thats what we need,half the people on the road baked out of their minds on pot.....gheez,there is no talking you heads out of this,dont know why I try.

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SqueaknEagle

9:41AM Jun 23 2010

see how many lawyers, people in the courts and police officers smoke the sh***...

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SqueaknEagle

9:35AM Jun 23 2010

you hit the nail on the head.....you are absolutely right of what you said.....

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Purerealms

9:33AM Jun 23 2010

Please! Read O'Shaugnessy's Journal of Cannabis in Clinical Practice (online). Also many articles that have far more insight and knowledge are available on the NORML site. Cannabis for medical purposes is easy to take in the form of consumables, thus eliminating smoking it. Delicious in pasta sauce. Great as juiced. Additionally, there are different strains of cannabis for different purposes in different ratios of THC to CBD. A strain used for anxiety is different from a strain used for neuropathic pain. Please do your homework before writing. Or, do you just enjoy being yellow journalist? Cannabis has literally saved millions of lives by reducing their suffering and pain (without psychogenic effects) and costs far less than the financial expense and iatrogenic effects of Big Pharma. Can you imagine what life is like without pills for headaches, backaches, insomnia, and more?

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