

Legalising cannabis: valuable lessons from other countries



The Czech Republic and Colombia have gone about decriminalising cannabis and legislating its medical application in different ways. Some of the results make for interesting reading, says **Thomas Walker**.

Let's begin with a brief recap on cannabis basics. Cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) are the two principal natural compounds found in plants of the *Cannabis* genus. Both offer medical benefits, such as the relief of pain and anxiety, and the reduction of inflammation and nausea. Only THC, however, produces the 'high', and its level is therefore strictly controlled in medical cannabis.

This article looks at cannabis legislation in two diverse countries: the Czech Republic and Colombia.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC

In 2010, the Czech Republic decriminalised the possession of up to 10g of dried cannabis and the cultivation of up to five plants. Seeds are freely available and it's not a criminal offence to buy or own cannabis seeds. January 2013 saw the passing of a law that permitted doctors to prescribe cannabis to their patients. To ensure that standards were maintained, imported cannabis was used for the first year; thereafter domestic production was given the green light.

Since 1 January 2022, doctors have been allowed to prescribe medical cannabis to their patients electronically and the percentage of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) permitted has been tripled. Physicians can prescribe up to 180g of dried cannabis as a total between all their patients per month. The Czech public health system covers 90% of the price of the prescription.

Nearly 200 doctors in the country are prescribing cannabis, and the rollout of medicinal cannabis appears to be highly successful: 434 patients were registered for cannabis treatment in 2019, and this number skyrocketed to 4 601 in 2021, a tenfold increase in

two years. According to the Czech News Agency, the treatments helped to improve the health and well-being of 69% of those patients.

Czech Medical Herbs is the sole producer, importer and distribution company for medicinal cannabis in the Czech Republic and in 2013 became the first company in the country to successfully attain import, manufacturing and distribution licences.

IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, CANNABIS TREATMENT INCREASED TENFOLD IN TWO YEARS

CBD AND HEMP

CBD products can be found everywhere in the republic, and, although the use and sale of CBD products is legal, the sale of CBD in vape pens or e-cigarettes is not.

CBD stores and vending machines throughout Prague distribute quality CBD buds, tinctures, topicals, and other products.

Hemp cultivation for industrial purposes is not particularly widespread. However, recent changes made to legislation allow for the increase of the THC content in hemp genotypes. This will enable the selection of hardier hemp genotypes with increased resistance to disease, pests, and climatic conditions.

COLOMBIA

Colombia decriminalised personal cannabis use as long ago as 2004, and in 2015, the Colombian Supreme Court ruled that an individual was allowed to grow up to 20 plants.

In 2016, the country enacted Law 1787, which regulated medicinal cannabis

in the country and essentially kick-started the commercial production, import, and export of medicinal cannabis. As of February 2020, Colombia had processed 608 licences. In addition, doctors can prescribe high-THC products, and patients have access to both THC and CBD cultivars through a network of more than 14 000 pharmacies in 350 different cities.

Unfortunately, due to issues surrounding cultivar registration and commercialisation quotas, the industry in Colombia has stalled.

Only genetics registered with the Colombian Agricultural Institute can be used for commercial purposes. The process is a lengthy one for plant producers and involves growing the particular cultivar from start to finish and then having the yield, cannabinoid profile and other technical information audited. One of the challenges of producing cannabis in Colombia is that no plant is allowed to be destroyed at any stage of production. This is a problem, as not all plants perform optimally, which is why growers always produce excess plants, cull those that under-perform, and only keep those that produce the desired results.

All of this is reflected in the country's cannabis output. According to statistics supplied by the International Narcotics Control Board, Colombia's estimated annual production of psychoactive cannabis for 2020 was a mere 1,95t, a far cry from the estimated total of 40t in 2019.

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