UK medical cannabis imports have tripled in size this year

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1st November this year marks five years since the UK government legalised cannabis-based products for medicinal use in 2018 and figures released by the Home Office this week have shown that the amount of medical cannabis imported has tripled in volume this year.[1]

Responding to a parliamentary question, Chris Philp the Home Office minister responsible for medical cannabis, told the Commons that in 2023- up until September 19th
this year- the UK had imported 23,890 Kg of cannabis (in base drug form). This is more than triple the 7,762 Kg of cannabis that was imported in 2022.

Patients can access these cannabis-based products for medicinal use through private clinics where they pay for the medicine which costs between £6-11 a gram, suggesting that if all these imports are making it patients that the market is already worth over £143 million per annum, which is considerably more than the £44m in sales estimated by market analysts Prohibition Partners. Estimates on the current number of patients in the UK are around 30,000- 32,000 but this is quite a small market in comparison to comparable countries where medical cannabis has been legalised. In Australia, doctors prescribed the drug to 316,879 patients in 2022 with over a million prescriptions having been issued since the drug was legalised in 2016.[2]
In Germany, where patients are reimbursed through the statutory health insurance system, 372,000 prescriptions were issued by doctors in 2021 with cannabis flowers accounted for almost EUR 70 million in value and cannabinoid-containing medicines a further EUR 46 million.[3]

Medical cannabis cultivation companies are now beginning to come online in the UK, potentially reducing the need for imports, which have their own complications. ‘While it is really encouraging to see this apparent growth in the UK market, patients have found it difficult to get consistent supply and the quality of the imports has been variable ’ said Mark Heley, a representative of the UK-based cultivation company Glass Pharms which has just built a state-of-the-art 2.4 hectare facility in Wiltshire, England. ‘We will be able to provide a secure supply chain for UK patients built here in the UK by the end of year, so that patients will no longer have to be concerned that when their prescriptions run out, they will not be able to get resupplied.’

Cannabis Industry Council CEO Mike Morgan-Giles commented: "While the regulatory and policy environment remains challenging, it is positive to see this notable growth in the amount of imported medical cannabis. This indicates that awareness of cannabis medicines is increasing and prescription patient numbers are rising. We hope this momentum will continue, ideally alongside growth in the UK cannabis market - which will help boost the economy and create jobs."

For more information contact:

Mark Heley, Glass Pharms mh@glasspharms.com

https://glasspharms.com/

Mike Morgan-Giles, Cannabis Industry Council mikemg@cicouncil.org.uk

https://www.cicouncil.org.uk/

[1]

https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-09-18/199881

[2]

[3] https://www.gleisslutz.com/en/Dynamics_in_the_German_cannabis_market.html#:~:text=In 2021, the number of,self-payers and private patients.

Company Contact:

Glass Pharms

T. 07904856199
E. mh@glasspharms.com
W. https://glasspharms.com/

Additional Contact(s):
Mark Heley is the press contact

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