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"We aim to work with various state governments to implement cannabis cultivation"

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Pan India Medical Cannabis and Hemp Association (PIMCHA) is on a mission to educate the masses about the benefits of the medical use of Cannabis but at the same time stand for responsible dispensation of these medicines. CBD oil, derived from the cannabis plant, has certain benefits when it comes to alleviating inflammation, insomnia and anxiety. Varun Rungta, General Secretary, PIMCHA, discloses more about the benefits of cannabis and recommends policy amendments towards clarity on regulations in India.



What will be the future of medical cannabis in India?

The interest in medical cannabis, CBD-infused medicines has gained considerable momentum over the last decade. Wide-spread reporting on the ability of cannabis to alleviate inflammation, insomnia, and anxiety has resonated with consumers globally. Today, there are two approved pharmaceutical drugs - Epidiolex for various forms of Epilepsy and Sativex for neuropathic pain and spasticity associated with Multiple Sclerosis. At the same time, 45+ countries have approved the medical use of Cannabis as a therapy option for various ailments ranging from Cancer Pain, Cancer Cachexia, and Rheumatoid Arthritis to Parkinson's Disease, and many more. In India, we currently have 2 pathways going forward - Ayurveda, where the medical use of Cannabis leaves is already approved federally, and Allopathy, where a generic version of Epidiolex was recently approved by the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI).

India suffers a massive disease burden. Arthritis affects 15 per cent of the people, i.e., over 210 million people in India. 19 per cent of the Indian population suffers from chronic pain. Over 10 per cent of the adult Indian population suffers from chronic insomnia, and post-COVID-19, there has been an increase in the percentage of corporate employees reporting work-related stress.

With a mix of positive policy formations allowing commercial cultivation of Cannabis and relevant clinical studies conducted by the industry, medical cannabis has the potential to provide not only a robust therapy option to patients but also contribute to the economy in terms of employment creation and exports. The economic potential for this could far exceed \$1B by the end of 2030.

Cannabis, also known as marijuana among other names, is a psychoactive drug and is disputed. What role will PIMCHA play to get rid of negativity and ensure its efficacy in the Indian healthcare sector?

PIMCHA does not promote the recreational use of Cannabis. We want to work with the government, policymakers, doctors, patients, and the media to educate them about the benefits of the medical use of Cannabis but at the same time stand for responsible dispensation of these medicines.

We have developed a comprehensive guide for our members to follow all the regulatory guidelines and some more to ensure we lead by example.

Lastly, Cannabis has been a large part of our culture and was accepted as a medicine for thousands of years until 1985. So on a larger scheme of things, the negative perception of the plant is relatively new i.e. ~30 years. We believe with the right educational initiatives and the focus on its medical use, we will be able to get rid of the negativity surrounding the plant.

What are the current regulatory challenges?

There are several challenges to operating within the industry due to multiple interlocked regulations across various government bodies. At PIMCHA, we are recommending policy amendments and working towards clarity on regulations jointly with various government institutions and bodies.

The two major regulatory challenges impeding the growth of the industry today are the lack of Cannabis cultivation policies and confusion on state excise regulations dating back to the 1950s and 1960s.

Several states like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh are leading the cause of policy development around cultivation and manufacturing. We hope to see some positive news in 2023.

For state excise regulations - we are studying these rules and engaging in dialogue with the relevant authorities to provide clarity to our members around storage, distribution, and selling in various states.

What will be your five years plan down the line?

In the next five years

- We aim to work with various state governments to implement cultivation and manufacturing policies.
- Clarify state excise regulations to ensure businesses can operate without fear of outdated rules.
- Officially have CBD or Cannabidiol classified as a Non-Narcotic.
- Have Cannabis flowers below a certain threshold of THC, classified as a Non-Narcotic.

How many members are currently under the ambit of PIMCHA?

We currently have over 20 members from across the industry.

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