

Medical cannabis may get nod in India

Plant's active ingredients may have potential to treat cancer, epilepsy, sickle cell anaemia

TV JAVAN

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Medical marijuana may soon become legal in the country with India's scientists making an earnest effort for the first time to find potential use for the active ingredients in the cannabis plant in the management of diseases such as cancer, epilepsy and sickle cell anaemia.

"Cannabis-based drugs have the potential to meet the unmet needs of terminally-ill cancer patients and of those suffering from epilepsy and sickle cell anaemia, a hereditary disease that afflicts nearly two crore tribals living mainly in central States," Ram Vishwakarma, Director of the Jammu-based Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine (IIIM), told a meeting of experts and industry captains here on Friday.

"The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), of which IIIM is a part, decided to take a lead

role in this as we are a neutral party and have no commercial bias," Vishwakarma said. The recreational use of cannabis is prohibited under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985. The bar does not apply to an edible preparation called *bhang*, which is allowed in some States.

In June, the US Food and Drug Administration approved the first-ever cannabis-based drug for the treatment of seizures associated with two rare and severe forms of epilepsy.

Pact with researchers

The IIIM has already tied up with researchers at the Tata Memorial Centre (TMC) in Mumbai, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and a Raipur-based hospital to carry out clinical trials for cannabis-based drugs for the treatment of cancer, epilepsy and sickle cell anaemia. Two active compounds of cannabis that are being



explored for medical use are tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).

"We are in the process of applying for regulatory approvals," he said.

In addition to exploring the plant's potential in pain and palliative care, cancer specialists at the TMC would like to see whether its active compounds would be useful in surgical setting too. "Suppose cannabis can put the cells in the body in a 'state of bliss', as they do to a human being, and if a similar effect is there on tumour cells too, can we use this state of non-reaction to extirpate cancer cells," wondered Rajendra Badwe, director, TMC. "Nowhere else has this been explored," he said.