

Minister: Legalising medical marijuana not top priority

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Monday June 13, 2016

12:04 PM GMT+8

UPDATED:

June 13, 2016

12:33 PM GMT+8



Datuk Seri Dr S Subramaniam says the government will not legalise the use of cannabis for medical purposes yet. — Picture by Yusof Mat IsaPUTRAJAYA,

June 13 — Putrajaya will not legalise the use of cannabis for medical purposes yet as it's not an immediate priority, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr S Subramaniam said today.

He said the government had "other" priorities, but did not specify what they were.

"Not as yet. I think we went through this before. We have got other priorities at this moment; that is not our immediate priority," Subramaniam told reporters at an event at Hospital Putrajaya here.

Pain experts told *Malay Mail Online* recently that they cautiously support the use of cannabis-based medicine to expand treatment options for chronic pain management.

Dr Maya Nagaratnam, pain management and anaesthetic consultant with Pantai Hospital, said opioids are effective to treat pain only for 70 per cent of the population and that such painkillers have more side effects (e.g. nausea, vomiting and constipation) than medical marijuana as well as far higher tolerance and addiction levels. Chronic pain is pain that lasts for more than three months.

A 2014 US-based survey by health site WebMD showed that the majority of doctors said medical marijuana should be legalised nationally, with the highest support coming from oncologists and

haematologists, as it is typically used to treat chronic pain from illnesses like cancer, chemotherapy-related nausea and multiple sclerosis, besides seizure disorders.

Malaysia has very strict drug laws. Section 6 of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 prohibits the possession of cannabis, an offence punishable with imprisonment of up to five years, or a fine not exceeding RM20,000.

Under Section 39A, being found with over 50 grammes is punishable with a jail term of at least five years and at least 10 strokes of the rotan.

It is unknown how many Malaysians use marijuana for medical purposes, since the FDA-approved cannabis-based pills and the cannabis-based mouth spray licenced in the UK, Canada, and several European countries are not registered here.

However, the Facebook page MalaysiaMedicalMarijuana currently has almost 19,000 likes since it was set up in 2011.