

The Virgin Islands Consortium

PR Justice Secretary: You Can Eat Marijuana In Puerto Rico But Not Smoke It

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SAN JUAN – Smoking marijuana for medicinal purposes will not be allowed in Puerto Rico, but cannabis derivatives could be consumed in other ways, government officials said this week as they provided more details on the governor's weekend executive order on cannabis use.

Justice Secretary Cesar Miranda told The Associated Press that the government would allow patients access to cannabis derivatives that would be inhaled or used orally, such as potions or pills.

"Smoking marijuana is not being contemplated as part of a medical treatment," Miranda said.

Advocates say marijuana helps with conditions like chronic pain, glaucoma, anxiety, and nausea from chemotherapy or drugs to combat HIV.

Gov. Alejandro Garcia Padilla issued a surprise order late Sunday directing the island's health department to authorize the use of some or all controlled substances or derivatives of the cannabis plant for medical use. Health Secretary Ana Rius has three months to submit a report that details how the order will be implemented, the impact it will have and what future steps could be taken.

It is unclear whether Garcia Padilla supports smoking pot to treat illnesses. He did not specify in his executive order what type of medical marijuana uses he supports, and his office said he had no plans to comment on the issue.

Rius told reporters Tuesday that smoking marijuana regardless of its purpose would still be considered a crime.

The general use of medical marijuana is legal in 23 U.S. states, and a group of U.S. legislators is seeking to remove federal prohibitions on it. In the Caribbean, Jamaica recently passed a law that partially decriminalizes the possession of small amounts of pot and paves the way for a legal medical marijuana sector.

Of the 23 states permitting medicinal uses of marijuana, only New York bars people from smoking pot for such purposes, said Amanda Reiman at the New York-based Drug Policy Alliance, which supports marijuana legalization.

"A lot of patients prefer to inhale the cannabis than take it orally," she said in a phone interview. "If they have to take it only through a pill, it can be very difficult to tell what the right dose is ... It's pretty short-sighted to take away that method that most patients rely on to figure out how cannabis affects them."

Some patients might opt for a tea or an edible form of marijuana if they are having trouble sleeping, said Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance. Others dealing with spasms from multiple sclerosis or nausea from chemotherapy will likely want an immediate effect, he said.

"Smoking brings on the pain relief in less than a minute," he said. "You want them to take the medication in the form that works best for them."

Puerto Rico's justice secretary said that once the health department's report is finalized, it can go into effect without further approval from the governor.

Rius added that the University of Puerto Rico is collaborating with two U.S. companies to launch a clinical investigation into the use and production of medicinal cannabis. She identified the companies as Chicago-based Quantum 9 and Las Vegas-based GrowBlox Sciences.

"We're taking a significant step in the area of health that is fundamental to our development and quality of life," Garcia Padilla said in a statement. "I am sure that many

patients will receive appropriate treatment that will offer them new hope."

Miranda's statement makes good on Garcia Padilla's promise to outline the specific authorized uses of marijuana and its derivatives for medical purposes. He noted that medical marijuana is used in the U.S. mainland and elsewhere to treat pain associated with migraines and illnesses including epilepsy, multiple sclerosis and AIDS.

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