‘Huge demand’: Portugal dreams of becoming medical cannabis hub

A Tilray worker seals cannabis flowers in a bag at their Portugal farm (PATRICIA DE MELO MOREIRA) (PATRICIA DE MELO MOREIRA/AFP/AFP)

“We should be the new El Dorado of medical cannabis production,” said agronomist Jose Martins as dozens of workers harvested marijuana in bright sunshine at a farm in southeastern Portugal.

The country is fast becoming a European hub for medical cannabis, with its warm temperate subtropical climate – often compared to California’s – making it an ideal place to grow the plant.

“No other country in Europe has better environmental conditions,” Martins told AFP at the plantation, which is surrounded by razor wire and infrared cameras.

Set in hills near Serpa dotted with olive trees and cork oaks, the 5.4-hectare (13.3-acre) farm owned by the Portuguese pharmaceutical company FAI Therapeutic produces around 30 tonnes of cannabis flowers a year.

They set up two years ago after a flood of foreign cannabis producers were drawn to Portugal because of its favourable climate and legislation.

More than 60 companies are currently authorised to grow, produce or distribute medical cannabis products there, with 170 more having applied for permission.

Portugal exported some 12 tonnes of cannabis-based medical products last year, mainly to Germany – Europe’s largest market – as well as to Poland, Spain and Australia, according

to the national drugs agency, Inframed.

– High standards –

But the industry has even higher ambitions.

“Portugal is clearly at the forefront of European countries producing cannabis for medical use,” said Jose Tempero, the medical director at Tilray, a Canadian multinational that set up a cannabis farm near the central town of Cantanhede in 2019, straight after Portugal legalised marijuana-based medicines.

The farm has its own labs and processing and packaging sites, with its cannabis oil selling as far afield as Latin America.

The Portuguese boom is fuelled by growing global demand for medical cannabis for chronic pain, the side effects of cancer therapy, some forms of epilepsy and other ailments.

Around 50 nations have so far approved the use of cannabis-based medicines, and that number is expected to rise.

The global medical cannabis market is expected to grow to over $65 billion by 2030 from $16.6 billion last year, according consulting firm Grand View Research.

“There is a huge demand from patients,” said Bernard Babel, the head of German cannabis pharmaceutical firm Avextra, which set up part of its business in Portugal.

Portugal’s rising importance in the emerging industry down to more than its sunny climate, however.

Babel said it has “very good regulatory framework” thanks to its 2019 legislation which sets well-defined quality standards, he added.

– ‘Growing acceptance’ –

Pedro Ferraz da Costa, CEO of the Iberfar Group, the parent

firm of the Serpa farm, said these regulations reassure international customers “that the products leaving the country offer safety guarantees”.

While Portugal may be at the forefront of medical cannabis production in Europe, patients in the country complain they have difficulty obtaining the drugs since many doctors are still reluctant to prescribe them and their cost is not fully covered by state healthcare.

“There is a lack of information” within the medical profession in this “very conservative” country, said Lara Silva, whose six-year-old daughter suffers from a serious form of epilepsy that has hampered her motor and cognitive development.

When she decided to treat her daughter with CBD, a derivative of cannabis two years ago, she said she had to order it from Spain.

Tilray’s Tempero said medical marijuana still suffers from a certain “stigma” but he sees “a growing acceptance of cannabis beyond its recreational use”.

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