



Medicinal cannabis in the Netherlands: most patients prefer coffeeshop over pharmacy

by Derrick Bergman (Encod, VOC)

Medicinal cannabis has been legally available in Dutch pharmacies since 2003. But patients still face a lot of hurdles and problems to get -and keep- access to their medicine.

In his book 'Medicinal Weed Oil: the ideal folk medicine', Dutch cannabis pioneer Wernard Bruining writes about a morning about twenty years ago. Bruining opened up the first cannabis coffeeshop in Amsterdam in 1973 and founded Europe's first growshop Positronics in 1985. He writes: "On a morning in 1994 I woke up with a little sentence in my head that kept coming back to me: 'Mediwiet en anders niet!'" This would translate as 'Medical Weed and nothing else!' Wernard continues: "I understood that I had to introduce the new word "MEDIWIET" in the Dutch language to broaden the image people have of cannabis and to reduce their focus on recreational use by pointing out other positive possibilities of this miraculous plant."

Wernard designed a "Mediwiet" logo with a big cannabis leaf and two Staffs of Asclepius, symbolizing the double benefit of cannabis, both on mind and body. He approached a number of cannabis coffeeshops and asked them to sell cannabis to medicinal users for half of their normal price. Within weeks fifty coffeeshops had agreed to do this. Wernard sent them posters with the text "Official Mediwiet Dealer".

Around the same time, a man called Ger de Zwaan started a foundation for medicinal cannabis in Rotterdam. Having went through the whole pharmaceutical circus himself, without any results apart from severe side effects, he had discovered cannabis and made a quite unbelievable recovery. Between 1995 and 2003 he helped out hundreds of patients through his PMM foundation (Stichting Patiëntenbelangen Medische Marihuana, foundation Patients Interests Medical Marijuana).

Medicinal cannabis went official in the spring of 2000, with the foundation of the Office for Medicinal Cannabis. This government organization is part of the Dutch Ministry of Health. Because of the UN treaties on drugs, such a government agency is mandatory for any member state who wants to give its citizens legal access to cannabis for medicinal purposes.

There is a solid monopoly on the production of medicinal cannabis in my country. Bedrocan is the only company that has an exemption from the Opium Law, the law that deals with all illegal drugs. It might be good to stress here that cannabis is still an illegal substance in the Netherlands; the coffeeshops are officially still breaking the law everyday. This is our famous, or infamous, "gedoogbeleid" or condoning policy.

Between the setting up of the Office for Medicinal Cannabis in 2000 and the first batch of cannabis in the pharmacies in September 2003, a bitter fight was fought over the privilege to be the only legal producer. Pioneers like James Burton and Marcel de Wit, who had been growing and distributing

medicinal grade cannabis since the nineties, were left out in the cold. None of their experience and expertise went into the new project.

For years, Bedrocan offered only two varieties of cannabis. Cultivation is done according to pharmaceutical norms for the production of botanical drugs, including the guidelines of Good Agricultural Practice (GAP). All cannabis is treated with gamma radiation to guarantee it's free of pesticides and heavy metals and purged of any micro organisms. Some patients claim this radiation has a negative effect on the quality of the cannabis; Bedrocan states that the process is a demand of the Office of Medical Cannabis.

This year Bedrocan has introduced a new variety, Bedrolite, containing 9% CBD and only 0.4% THC. The total number of varieties is now five. Compared to the menu of the average cannabis coffeeshop, five varieties is not a lot of choice. Compared to the situation in the American states that have implemented medicinal cannabis regulation through dispensaries it's even worse. For most patients it takes a while to find out what particular strain or variety suits their needs best; this is why variation is so important. An extra problem is that general practitioners and doctors are still very hesitant when it comes to prescribing medical cannabis and their knowledge in this field is usually very limited. It takes some patients over a year to finally get a prescription.

And then there's the price: patients pay around €9 per gram if they buy one of the Bedrocan varieties at the pharmacy. Prices in the coffeeshops range from €4 to €15 per gram. Not one insurance company fully reimburses medicinal cannabis, even the official kind, distributed by the pharmacies. The result is that a lot of patients prefer buying at coffeeshops, growing their own medicine or buying on the black market. Just last month the Dutch Supreme Court has ruled that cannabis bought at coffeeshops is not tax deductible as healthcare costs.

A study from the University of Utrecht, published in 2013, analyzed the first ten years of official medical cannabis in the Netherlands. It turned out that annually only about a thousand people buy medical cannabis at the pharmacy. Between 2007 and 2013 there were a little over 5000 people who bought cannabis at pharmacies. This number has remained stable over the years, with a small rise in the most recent years.

The production of Bedrocan has exploded in the meantime, growing 30 to 40 percent annually in recent years. The cause is a rise in export of medical cannabis and a growing number of scientific studies into medical cannabis. Bedrocan currently exports to Italy, Germany, Finland, Norway, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. It's quite ironic that at the same time, the Dutch minister of justice can't stop claiming that the majority of illegally grown cannabis is exported and how the police should combat this...

The once tolerant policy towards recreational cannabis and coffeeshops has been under pressure for over ten years now, with a string of new repressive measures and a war on drugs style program to combat any kind of cannabis production, big or small. Medicinal users who grow their own medicine are not spared. There are numerous examples of patients being raided for as little as six plants. In one case the patient had a declaration of his doctor attached to his growing tent, stating the plants were for medicinal use, because the Bedrocan cannabis does not work for this patient. The police still trashed the place and the plants, arrested the patient and left him in jail for a weekend. The patient received this police "treatment" twice.

A recent development is the fast growing popularity of cannabis and/or cbd oil. Again Wernard Bruining has played a pioneering role. After seeing Run from the Cure, the Rick Simpson movie in 2009, he realized that this oil was the future. He developed a safer process to produce the oil and diluted it with olive oil to make it easier to take the right dose. He started producing and distributing

his own oil through the internet and in 2011 published the book I quoted earlier. It contains hundreds of pages of patients testimonies as well as background information and detailed recipes for making cannabis oil, tea, butter, *bhang* and cake.

The legal status of cannabis oil in the Netherlands is uncertain at the moment. Some argue that any oil containing less than 0.4% thc is legal. Others point out that more traditional hash oil has been scheduled as a hard drug in the Dutch Opium Law since 1976. It is clear that production of cannabis oil is spreading throughout the country, from large companies to kitchen sink producers. Small producers usually work with regular thc rich plants, providing a different effect from CBD only oil. This kind of oil typically sells for about €50 per bottle.

In conclusion: medicinal cannabis users in the Netherlands still face a lot of challenges and problems. Doctors and GP's lack knowledge and are very hesitant to prescribe medical cannabis. The official medical cannabis at the pharmacies is expensive, there are only five varieties available and apart from Sativex there are no other cannabis products like oil, edibles and tinctures available at pharmacies. Insurance companies only reimburse part of the costs of medical cannabis, if they reimburse at all. Patients growing their own medicine are hunted down like common criminals and in some cases harassed by the police.

There is still a long way to go before the Dutch people can fully benefit from the medicinal and therapeutic qualities of this miraculous plant.

Sources:

'*Mediwietolie – Het ideale volksmedicijn*' (Medicinal Weed Oil: the ideal folk medicine), Wernard Bruining, uitgeverij Beupain, August 2011

'*The prevalence and incidence of medicinal cannabis on prescription in The Netherlands*', Arno Hazekamp, Eibert R. Heerdink, European Journal of Pharmacology Volume 69, Issue 8, August 2013

'*Chemopatiënten kweken stiekem cannabis*' (Chemo patients are secretly growing cannabis), de Volkskrant, February 14, 2015

'*Het lelijke gezicht van de Hollandse hennepoorlog: Kleine medicinale kweker wordt keihard aangepakt*' (The ugly face of the Dutch weed war: small medicinal grower dealt with ruthlessly), Highlife Magazine, January 2014

'*'Medicinale' cannabis uit coffeeshop niet aftrekbaar als zorgkosten*' ('Medicinal' cannabis bought at coffeeshop not tax deductible as healthcare costs), De Telegraaf, February 25, 2015

About Derrick Bergman:

Derrick Bergman (1971) has been covering cannabis and hemp as a journalist and photographer since 1994. In 2009 he was one of the founders of the VOC (Union for the abolition of cannabis prohibition), of which he is spokesperson and secretary. Since 2010 he is the coordinator of Cannabis Liberation Day, the biggest cannabis and hemp event in the Netherlands. In 2014 he was elected as member of the steering committee of Encod, the European coalition for just and effective drug policies.

Web:

Union for the abolition of cannabis prohibition: www.voc-nederland.org

European coalition for just & effective drug policies: www.encod.org

Office for Medicinal Cannabis: www.cannabisbureau.nl/en/medicinalcannabis

Bedrocan: www.bedrocan.nl

Cannabis Liberation Day Amsterdam: www.cannabisliberationday.org

Types of medicinal cannabis

Four types of medicinal cannabis are available through pharmacies: Bedrocan, Bedrobinol, Bediol and Bedica. The composition and strength varies (see table).

Types medicinale cannabis

	% dronabinol (THC)	% cannabidiol (CBD)	price per 5 gram*
Bedrobinol	approx. 13,5	<1	€ 38,-
Bedrocan	approx. 22	<1	€ 38,-
Bediol	approx. 6,3	approx. 8	€ 38,-
Bedica	approx. 14	<1	€ 38,-

* Excl. 6% VAT. The retail price per gram may vary if your pharmacy sells the products in smaller or larger units.

Visit to Bedrocan production facility, November 2013:

