

# Legal cannabis by post: inside the farm behind a British first

After years of relying on opioids to manage her pain from endometriosis, Chloe Durrington has received a prescription for cannabis grown in the UK



Chloe Durrington is delighted that cannabis gives her pain relief without the side effects of opioids

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[Venetia Menzies](#), Assistant Data Editor

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**H**e didn't know it, but the postman who knocked on Chloe Durrington's door to hand over a special delivery was making history. Inside the carefully wrapped box was roughly a month's supply of

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It was grown legally in Wiltshire to a pharmaceutical standard by Glass Farms, and prescribed by the private clinic Releaf to treat the debilitating pain Durrington experiences from [endometriosis](#).

After years of relying on prescribed opioids, she is delighted to have found a medication that eases her symptoms without causing unwanted side effects.

Durrington, 26, a content creator from Lancashire who raises awareness of endometriosis, is the first patient to be prescribed cannabis flower grown legally in the UK for commercial sale. Stamped with the “Made in Britain” quality mark, the product is the first cannabis-based medicine to have a fully domestic supply chain. “I’m very, very excited to be the first,” she said.

Data on medical cannabis production are estimates, but as of 2021, 43 per cent of licit global cannabis was produced in the UK, amounting to 329 tonnes, according to the International Narcotics Control Board.

So far, all of this has been used to create cannabis-derived products such as tinctures and oils – most of which are exported – rather than the plant’s flower itself being the product.



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Durrington, 26, suffers from endometriosis and uses a walking stick because of chronic pain in her legs

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Britain has quietly become a world leader in cannabis-derived products, making up 58 per cent of the world's total exports, followed by Canada and Finland.

Cambridge-based GW Pharmaceuticals — now owned by the American company Jazz Pharmaceuticals — led the way in creating licensed cannabis-derived medicines, but did not produce cannabis flower for medicinal use. Its main product was Sativex, a drug used to treat muscle stiffness and spasms in people with multiple sclerosis.

Glass Pharms, though, which runs the farm in the English countryside, are the first Home Office licence-holder to deliver Medicines Healthcare Regulation Authority regulated medical cannabis flower.

How did cannabis go from a fully outlawed narcotic to a legalised, UK-grown pharmaceutical product?



An employee of Glass Pharms at its Wiltshire facility removes leaves from cannabis plants

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Medical cannabis was legalised in 2018 after a campaign led by the mothers of two children, Billy Caldwell and Alfie Dingley, who had been diagnosed with rare forms of epilepsy in infancy.

Cannabis oil prescribed in the Netherlands dramatically reduced the frequency of their seizures after conventional medications had failed. But after Caldwell's medication was confiscated at Heathrow, Billy suffered a life-threatening seizure and was admitted to hospital. Sajid Javid, then home secretary, issued an urgent licence for the children, and requested a review of the medical benefits of cannabis.

The review concluded that there was clear evidence of therapeutic benefits, and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs downgraded the drug from schedule 1 to 2 and recommended clinical trials. Javid, [writing in The Times](#), stated that this was not a step towards legalisation for recreational use.



Billy and his mother Charlotte Caldwell in 2018, the week when the government intervened to provide him with an urgent licence to use medical cannabis to treat his epileptic seizures

CHARLES MCQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGE

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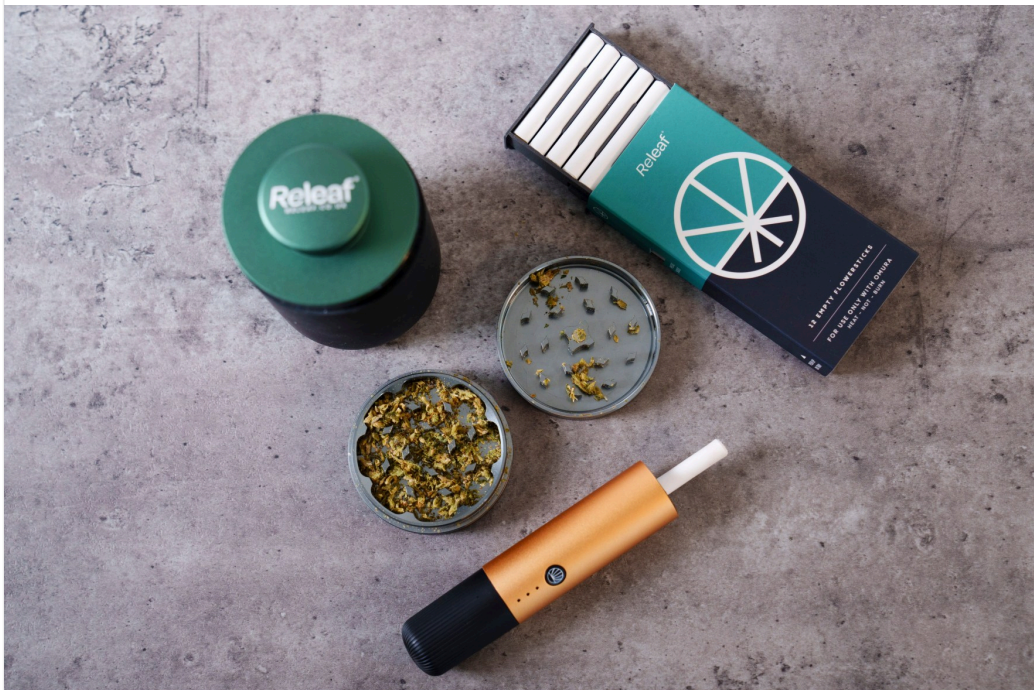
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NHS. Only those with rare forms of treatment-resistant epilepsy, nausea from chemotherapy or multiple sclerosis are eligible under the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines.

Private prescribers have stepped in, offering prescriptions to more than 32,000 people who have previously tried two medications that have failed to help their symptoms. After a consultation with a licensed doctor who will review the patient's NHS records, those eligible will be prescribed a specific strain.

Most clinics offer flower, gummies, vape cartridges, oils, tinctures, lozenges and capsules among other products.

Cannabis is prescribed by these clinics to people suffering from depression, anxiety, PTSD, autism, Parkinson's, menopause symptoms, endometriosis, fibromyalgia, arthritis, chronic pain, anorexia, epilepsy, cancer, sleep disorders and tremors amongst other illnesses.



Chloe Durrington's vape, cannabis, grinder, storage jar and mouth pieces, part of the welcome box she was provided with by Releaf.

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tinctures must rely on imports of flowers from countries such as Portugal and Canada. This inflates costs, limits domestic job creation and can lead to an inconsistent supply.

Glass Pharms' product hitting the market changes all of that.

“Patients will now have a security of supply that was previously missing from a market that relied on imports,” said James Duckenfield, the chief executive. “Our continuous harvesting model will help bring an end of the out-of-stock issues that have set back the development of this promising therapeutic area.”

### **How does the facility work?**

Entering the 2.4 hectare glasshouse run by Glass Pharms in Wiltshire is like stepping into the future, and feels more like a laboratory than a farm.

The plants are continuously cultivated throughout a 12-week cycle, moving through different climate chambers on robotic conveyor belts. While one batch is being harvested, another is being propagated.

No pesticides or single-waste plastics are used, and the company manufactures its own plant feed.

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Each chamber uses AI to monitor and adjust the temperature and humidity to create the climate needed for different stages of growth. No humans enter the chambers to remove the potential for contaminants, and the product is tested for any fungi or mould.

When producing medicines to pharmaceutical standards, consistency is key, which is why the “mother plant” of each strain is cloned and the environment is closely monitored to standardise production.



Clones of the “mother plant” in the low-light propagation stage of the growth cycle at Glass Pharms

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When the plant is first propagated, it needs to be in a low-light “early spring”. It is then moved through the simulated seasons of “late spring” for early flowering, “summer” for late flowering and “autumn” for the pre-harvest and harvest stages.

Glass Pharms’ managing director is Richard Lewis, who has 38 years of experience in glasshouse horticulture, previously dedicating his skills to growing tomatoes.

The company raised £26.5 million to build the facility in 2022.

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it dispatched its first product to a manufacturing facility for packaging, which distributed it to clinics including Releaf, Mamedica and Grow Pharma, which then prescribe to patients.

Glass Pharms' system creates an accelerated simulation of a growing year, and uses only 40 per cent of the power used by a traditional indoor facility.

LED lighting and glasshouse heating requires a substantial amount of electricity, despite 40 per cent of the light energy needed coming from the sun. The facility was purpose-built to be carbon negative, with a roof designed to capture rainfall and allow sunlight to permeate the glass.

Equipped with an on-site solar farm, the glasshouse was built adjacent to an energy production plant which turns food waste into power. This not only masks the smell of cannabis from any neighbours, but offers a clean energy source to grow the plants. By-products from the site's processes, such as excess heat and carbon dioxide, are used to heat, cool and feed the plants.



Cannabis plants in the growing phase are moved on robotic conveyor belts between climate chambers

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for her endometriosis, which can cause dependency, accidental overdoses and damage to the kidneys, heart, colon, liver and other organs.

“I tried all of the usual things like codeine and tramadol. I’ve even had to be admitted to hospital to receive morphine when the pain was really bad. These drugs cause awful side effects, and you don’t know what kind of damage they’re doing to your other organs,” she said.

At first she was worried that she would get into trouble with the police, but was pleased to find out that Releaf offers an individualised QR code to patients who can show this to the police to verify they are using legally prescribed cannabis.

Patients can even travel to some countries, including the EU and Canada, with their prescription and product in their hand luggage.

The cost of Durrington’s first consultation with Releaf was £99, and the prescription cost £80 for ten grams. A monthly prescription of £40 covers pharmacy fees, delivery and consultation costs, as well as a welcome box including a vapouriser.

Costs vary depending on the prescriber and the flower chosen for the patient, ranging from £5 to £13 per gram, similar prices to those on the illicit market.

However, this is considerably more expensive than prescriptions on the NHS. Campaigners believe that the NHS needs to expand prescribing to help families avoid the prohibitive costs of going private, but the lack of clinical trials impedes progress.

Durrington had not tried cannabis recreationally prior to being prescribed, and was concerned about the psychoactive effects.

The GP who prescribed it to her, Dr Alex Van Heerden, chose a

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Chloe Durrington, who suffers from endometriosis and is the first person to be prescribed UK grown cannabis

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“I feel a lot more relaxed and chilled out, but I don’t get that ‘high’ feeling at all, it just helps me with my pain,” said Durrington.

Van Heerden, an NHS emergency physician originally from South Africa who is a consultant for Releaf, believes the stigma about using cannabis is an obstacle to patients finding alternatives that can have fewer side effects.

While the use of dependency-forming drugs such as benzodiazepines and opioids has been normalised in the UK, Van Heerden said some of his patients were embarrassed to admit they were prescribed cannabis medicinally.

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had reduced their quality of life, and manage their symptoms with cannabis instead.

Last week, one patient called him in tears after being able to walk his dog for the first time in four years without suffering extreme pain.

Van Heerden stressed the importance of careful prescribing, highlighting that anyone with a history of psychosis, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder is not eligible as cannabis can trigger and worsen psychotic symptoms.

“It’s not a wonder drug, like any medication, there are risks, and we need to be very cautious about them,” he said.

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