



It is the world's oldest euphoric drug – and yesterday the first medicine made from cannabis was licensed in the UK.

Sativex, a tincture of extracts from the cannabis plant, is sprayed under the tongue up to 12 times a day, as a treatment for the stiffness and spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis. But it is not going to be popping up on the black market as Britain's latest dance drug. The Home Office has rated it as having zero abuse potential.

Britain is the first country to give the drug full regulatory approval, although it has had a limited licence to treat neuropathic pain in Canada since 2005. It is made from plants grown at a secret location in southern England by GW Pharmaceuticals, a small biotech company whose shares have risen 60 per cent in the last six months in anticipation of yesterday's announcement.

The medicinal benefits of cannabis have been known for at least 2,000 years. Its analgesic properties were described by the British herbalist Nicholas Culpeper in 1653.

Two drugs containing a synthetic form of the active constituent tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) were used in the UK for more than 30 years to treat nausea in cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

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