

If you've been researching medical cannabis clinics in the UK, you've likely come across the phrase "unlicensed cannabis medicine." It's a phrase that can sound worrying or confusing. What does it really mean? Is it safe? And how does regulation and oversight fit into the picture?

In this post, we'll unpack these questions plainly, focusing on how unlicensed cannabis medicines are regulated, the role of healthcare regulators like the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and General Medical Council (GMC), and what patients need to know to stay safe and informed.

Understanding Unlicensed Medicines in the UK

First, let's clarify what "unlicensed medicine" means within UK healthcare.

When a medicine is "licensed," it means it has gone through a formal approval process by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). This process shows the medicine's safety, quality, and efficacy for specified conditions. Licensed medicines are clearly labelled with this information.

"Unlicensed medicines," by contrast, have not been through this process for particular uses or formulations. They may still be very effective and safe, but they lack the formal MHRA marketing authorisation for specific indications or patient groups. Cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPMs) often fall into this category, mainly because of the complex legal and regulatory hurdles around cannabis.

Why Are Cannabis Medicines Often Unlicensed?

Since November 2018, the UK has allowed specialist doctors to prescribe medical cannabis. However, most cannabis products available remain unlicensed [Article source](#) medicines. The main reason: the lack of large-scale clinical trials and regulatory approvals that would secure marketing authorisation from the MHRA.

This means that medical cannabis products currently prescribed—like dried flower, oils, or sprays—are unlicensed. Clinics and prescribers must follow strict guidelines when using these products.

Regulation and Clinic Oversight: The Role of CQC and GMC

If you're considering a private medical cannabis clinic, a good starting question is: **What oversight and regulation apply here?**

Care Quality Commission (CQC)

The CQC regulates all health and social care services in England, including private clinics prescribing cannabis medicines. They inspect clinics to ensure safety, quality of care, and compliance with legal requirements. Clinics must register with the CQC and meet fundamental standards.

CQC guidance on unlicensed medicines sets out that clinics must:

- Have clear governance systems for prescribing and monitoring unlicensed medicines.
- Obtain informed consent from patients, including clear communication about risks.
- Ensure clinical staff prescribing unlicensed medicines have appropriate qualifications and specialist competence.
- Maintain robust clinical records and follow-up monitoring.

You can check any clinic's registration and inspection reports on the CQC website. Always ask clinics for their registration number before booking a consultation.

General Medical Council (GMC) and Specialist Register

Only doctors registered with the GMC can legally prescribe medicines, including unlicensed cannabis products.

Further, the GMC expects prescribers of specialist treatments to have adequate knowledge and skills. Many cannabis medicines require specialist expertise, often in pain management, neurology, or palliative care.

A good clinic will have doctors who are on the GMC's Specialist Register in relevant fields. This ensures doctors are properly qualified to assess, prescribe, and monitor patients safely.

- **Beware clinics that claim “specialist doctors” but won’t name them or provide GMC registration numbers.**
- **Always verify the prescriber's GMC registration and specialty before committing.**

What Are the Risks of Using Unlicensed Cannabis Medicines?

“Unlicensed medicines risk” is a real concern—both for patients and regulators. It’s not that unlicensed automatically means “unsafe,” but there are legitimate caveats.





Key Risks to Understand:

1. **Quality Variation:** Unlicensed products may vary in composition or potency because they aren't subject to the same manufacturing standards as licensed medicines.
2. **Limited Evidence:** Clinical evidence of safety and efficacy may be limited or based on smaller studies, case reports, or patient experience rather than large clinical trials.
3. **Adverse Reactions and Interactions:** Because cannabis can affect people differently and interact with other medicines, monitoring for side effects is critical.
4. **Legal and Access Issues:** Unlicensed status means prescriptions may have higher costs, limited insurance cover, and potential supply issues.

Mandatory Risk Disclosure

The CQC requires clinics to clearly communicate these risks before prescribing. Informed consent is critical. Patients should receive plain, comprehensive information on:

- The unlicensed status and what that means
- Potential risks and side effects
- Alternative evidence-based treatments
- Monitoring and follow-up plans

Don't ever feel pressured to sign consent forms without understanding these points. This is an essential part of patient safety and shared decision-making.

Ensuring Safety, Quality, and Efficacy: What to Ask Your Clinic

When considering prescription cannabis at a private clinic, use this checklist to help you assess safety and trustworthiness:

Question Why It Matters What is your CQC registration number? Confirms the clinic is regulated and inspected for safety standards. Can you provide the GMC registration number and specialty of the prescribing doctor? Ensures the prescriber is qualified and on the Specialist Register related to cannabis use. Which cannabis medicines

do you prescribe and are they licensed? Transparency on what products you'll get and their regulatory status. How do you disclose and discuss the risks of unlicensed medicines? Checks the clinic's approach to informed consent and patient safety. What monitoring and follow-up are offered? Ensures ongoing review for safety and efficacy. What are all the costs, including medicine, pharmacy, and dispensing fees? Avoids hidden subscription traps that inflate prices.

Summary: What Patients Need to Know

- **“Unlicensed” means the medicine lacks formal MHRA marketing authorisation.** This is common with medical cannabis due to current regulations and evidence limits.
- **All prescribing doctors must be GMC-registered, ideally on the Specialist Register relevant to their field.** Specialist knowledge matters for safe prescribing.
- **Clinics must register with the CQC and meet high safety and quality standards.** You can check this publicly before booking appointments.
- **Risks must be clearly communicated and documented before using unlicensed cannabis medicine.** Informed consent is non-negotiable.
- **Ask questions about qualifications, regulation, risks, costs, and follow-up before starting treatment.** Don't take vague answers.

Medical cannabis treatment can offer relief to some patients, but it is not miracle medicine and its use must be handled carefully and professionally.

Be a smart patient. Always check a clinic's registration number, verify the prescribing doctor's GMC details, demand clear risk disclosure, and understand what “unlicensed” really means for your treatment safety and outcomes.

Further Reading and Resources

- CQC Guidance on Unlicensed Medicines
- GMC Medical Register & Specialist Register
- UK Government Cannabis Medicines Guidance