

The use of medical cannabis in the UK remains a complex patchwork of legality, clinical guidance, and practical access. While the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) permits prescribing unlicensed cannabis-based products for medicinal use, the reality of who can prescribe them—and under what conditions—is less straightforward. This blog explores the precise details around the legal and regulatory framework governing unlicensed cannabis prescribing, focusing on the role of the **GMC Specialist Register**, regulation by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in England, and the rise of video consultations and remote prescribing.

Understanding Legality vs Real-World Access

Since November 2018, specialist doctors have been allowed under UK law to prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use when clinically appropriate. However, the [More help](#) distinction between legality and actual access is critical and often muddled. Being legal to prescribe does not equate to broad availability or easy access for patients.

Despite the legal framework, routine NHS funding for unlicensed cannabis products is almost non-existent. This funding gap has spawned a growing private market where patients pay out-of-pocket to receive prescriptions and products. This shift brings many issues into focus, including prescribing rules, regulation oversight, costs, and patient expectations.

Who Can Prescribe Unlicensed Cannabis Products?

Central to prescribing unlicensed cannabis products in the UK is the clinician's registration and specialist competence. The **GMC Specialist Register** plays a pivotal role here.

The Role of the GMC Specialist Register

The General Medical Council (GMC) controls who can prescribe unlicensed medicines by ensuring that prescribers have the appropriate expertise. For specialist areas like cannabis-based products, a prescriber should be:

- Registered on the GMC Specialist Register with a relevant specialist qualification
- Acting within their recognised *specialist field of competence*
- Prescribing such products on an individual clinical basis, not as routine

In practice, UK guidance and the GMC advise that cannabis prescribing should come primarily from specialists with experience in the condition being treated—for example, neurologists for epilepsy, pain specialists, or palliative care consultants.

The specialist's knowledge is paramount because unlicensed cannabis products lack the robust evidence base most licensed medicines have, and come with variability in formulation and dosing, heightening risk for adverse effects.

GP Prescribing and Specialist Support

Currently, GPs cannot initiate prescriptions for unlicensed cannabis products but may continue prescribing initiated by specialists under shared care arrangements. This system is not widely established for cannabis products due to limited NHS protocols.

Regulation and Oversight: The CQC and Remote Prescribing

With the expansion of telemedicine, video consultations and remote prescribing have become commonplace, including in the private sector for cannabis prescriptions. However, this modality comes with regulatory requirements to protect patient safety.

The Role of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in England

Private clinics providing remote consultations in England must register with the **CQC** and declare their remote prescribing practices. This registration ensures:

1. Clinics meet standards for clinical governance and patient safety
2. Doctors involved are on the GMC Specialist Register relevant to the treatment
3. Processes to verify patient identity and establishing clinical need before prescribing

Patients considering private clinics for cannabis prescriptions should verify that a clinic is CQC registered and transparent about their remote prescribing policies. Such oversight guards against inappropriate prescribing or unsafe practices.

Video Consultations: Benefits and Pitfalls

Video consultations can improve patient access, especially for those with mobility issues or in remote locations. However, cannabis prescribing requires thorough clinical assessment, including past treatment history and in some cases, physical examinations. The inability to conduct a full clinical review remotely is a limitation clinics must manage carefully.

Common Pitfalls in the Private Prescribing Market

One frequent issue when exploring private cannabis prescribing is the lack of upfront cost transparency. Many clinics advertise treatments or consultations without stating clear prices or follow-up costs involved.

Key Points on Pricing Transparency

- **Consultation Fees:** Patients should expect a specialist-level consultation fee reflective of the expertise required.
- **Prescription Costs:** The price for the unlicensed cannabis product itself—often charged separately—must be clearly specified.
- **Follow-up Appointments:** Ongoing care and monitoring are medically necessary. Clinics should state whether follow-ups are included or extra.

Without transparent pricing, patients risk surprise bills or feeling pressured to commit without full information. Clinics blurring the lines between healthcare treatments and wellness packages further complicate informed decisions.

Summary Checklist: Who Can Prescribe Unlicensed Cannabis in the UK?

Criteria	Requirement	Notes
Prescribing	Legality	Permitted for specialist doctors only
		GMC Specialist Register required for related specialty
	Clinical Competence	Must be within recognized specialist field of competence
Example:	neurologists, pain specialists, palliative care	Consultation Format
		In-person or video consultation allowed
Remote prescribing	must comply with CQC oversight in England	Prescription Initiation
	Only specialists can start	prescriptions
GPs	may continue prescribing	under shared care schemes
Clinic Oversight (England)	CQC	

registration mandatory for remote prescribing clinics Ensures compliance and patient safety Pricing Transparency Consultations, prescriptions and follow-ups must have stated prices Avoid clinics with vague or bundled pricing

The NHS Funding Gap and Its Impact on Patient Access

Despite the legal framework allowing specialist doctors to prescribe unlicensed cannabis products, NHS funding remains extremely limited. This lack of funding means that most patients must turn to private clinics if they wish to access treatment, for conditions such as chronic pain or epilepsy.



The NHS's cautious approach stems from a perceived lack of strong, high-quality evidence for many indications. Furthermore, variability between cannabis products—and their unlicensed status—creates challenges for NHS commissioning and prescribing guidelines.

Consequently:

- Private clinics have emerged to fill the demand gap
- Patients face significant out-of-pocket costs
- Insurance rarely covers these treatments due to their unlicensed nature
- Clinical specialist assessment remains essential for safe prescribing

Conclusions

In the UK, unlicensed cannabis products remain a niche but legally recognized treatment option, strictly regulated to ensure they are prescribed only by appropriately qualified specialists within their competence areas. The **GMC Specialist Register** is a vital marker of a doctor's eligibility to prescribe, especially given the complexities and risks around these products.

While video consultations and remote prescribing have enhanced access, they introduce their own regulatory challenges, at least in England where the CQC requires clinics to declare remote prescribing practices. Patients approaching private providers should be vigilant about the legitimacy of clinics, the qualifications of prescribing doctors, and transparent pricing for consultations, prescriptions, and follow-ups.

Ultimately, the gulf between legal prescribing rights and routine NHS availability channels most patients to private clinics, where careful due diligence is vital in a market that still blends healthcare and wellness in some places.

Understanding these nuances helps patients and carers make informed decisions about accessing unlicensed cannabis-based products safely and effectively.

