



For information only — not an official document

GLOBAL ISSUES

Timely access to controlled substances for international humanitarian emergencies

The availability of and access to controlled substances is essential to providing quality care in emergency settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the effectiveness of simplified control measures in emergency situations – which permit the international trade of controlled substances without the corresponding import authorizations and/or estimates – has been tested.

To help Member States improve their emergency preparedness, INCB published *Lessons from countries and humanitarian aid organizations in facilitating the timely supply of controlled substances during emergency situations*. The document sets out procedures to follow during emergency situations. INCB strongly encourages Member States to review existing national legislation and allow for greater flexibility in the international trade of controlled substances during emergency situations.

The role of social media in the promotion of the non-medical use of drugs

Social media platforms promote a range of negative behaviours including the facilitation and glamorization of non-medical drug use. Opportunities to buy cannabis, prescription painkillers and other controlled substances are readily available on social media platforms. Young people are the main users of social media platforms and are also the group with high rates of drug use. The link between exposure to social media and drug use should alert Member States to take a more active role in regulating them. INCB recommends that social media companies moderate and self-regulate their platforms and limit the advertisement and promotion of the non-medical use of drugs.

COVID-19, narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances

During the COVID-19 pandemic, disruptions in manufacturing key starting materials of active pharmaceutical ingredients, and the ingredients themselves, have affected the global supply chain of medicines in some major manufacturing countries. Border closures and social-distancing policies adopted by some countries have further complicated logistical challenges.

The consolidated statistics on narcotic drugs from 2020 confirm an increase in the consumption, manufacture and stockpiling of substances, specifically fentanyl and its analogues, in some countries. This trend has been largely driven by an increased need to provide pain relief and sedation for patients with COVID-19 in intensive care units.

At the outset of the pandemic, there were reports of shortages of medicines containing the substance midazolam in some parts of the world. Midazolam has proven to be crucial in treating severe cases of COVID-19. The shortages were partially driven by a higher demand for the substance and by delivery and transport disruptions associated with COVID-19 border restrictions. As the pandemic progressed, data provided by Member States indicated that the situation had improved and that countries successfully resumed importing and exporting midazolam across the globe.



For information only — not an official document

Regional consumption gaps remain for controlled medicines used for pain management

Regional analyses of the overall consumption of opioid analgesics used to relieve pain confirm that there are still large disparities between regions. Almost all consumption of opioid analgesics is concentrated in the developed countries of Europe and North America while consumption in other regions of the world is often insufficient to meet the medical needs of those populations. Countries reporting the highest average consumption of opioids for pain management in the period 2018–2020 were, in descending order, the United States, Germany, Austria, Israel and Belgium.

At the global level, opiate raw materials used to produce narcotic drugs remain sufficient to cover the reported global needs for 2021 and 2022. Significant regional disparities in the availability of narcotic drugs still exist because many countries do not accurately estimate their medical needs for opioids analgesics or have limited access to them. INCB emphasizes the importance of ensuring sufficient availability for all countries and regions and calls on Member States with greater resources to assist States with fewer resources to ensure access to and availability of narcotic drugs.

Challenges with fentanyl and fentanyl analogues

Fentanyl and fentanyl analogues continue to drive the number of overdose deaths attributed to synthetic opioids upward in Canada and the United States. The problem is probably widespread as the role of fentanyl analogues in overdose deaths is often undetected and thus underreported. This is because identifying such analogues requires specialized toxicology testing.

Fentanyl analogues are very potent and often trafficked in small quantities and in small packages. Vendors have been able to profit by marketing fentanyl analogues on e-commerce platforms and the darknet in an effort to evade screening and detection by platform administrators.

INCB maintains a list of more than 140 fentanyl-related substances with no current medical, industrial or other legitimate uses. INCB invites Member States and industry partners to use the list to facilitate actions that counter the manufacture, marketing, movement and monetization of the substances on the list.

Article 13 of the 1988 Convention offers great opportunities for monitoring the evolution of illicit drug manufacturing

The rapid evolution of illicit drug manufacturing requires a speedier response to better implement article 13 of the 1988 Convention on matters relating to equipment and materials used in illicit manufacture.

INCB held two expert group meetings on enhancing the operational use of article 13, which led to concrete cases of successful multilateral cooperation to prevent and investigate the diversion of specialized equipment. The contribution of the experts has been consolidated into an awareness-raising and guidance document, which will be reviewed by INCB in 2022 and subsequently shared with the international community.