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CULTURE TOLERATING RECREATIONAL DRUG USE UNDERMINES PREVENTION EFFORTS

Says New Annual Report of International Narcotics Control Board

If Governments want national and international efforts to be successful in preventing the spread of drug abuse, they must be ready to confront cultural trend setters who are actively creating a "drug-friendly" environment. This is one of the key messages of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) for its latest annual report released on 24 February.

Every year the Vienna-based body in its review of the world drug situation singles out a topical issue for special attention. Previous reports of the past few years dealt with topics such as legalization, money laundering and the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. The current report focuses on demand reduction and prevention. The most worrisome development in this regard, as the Board points out, is a culture of drug-friendliness that seems to be gaining prominence. Governments are currently confronted with the problem of how to come up with successful drug abuse prevention techniques and strategies in an environment that is more and more characterized by messages spread by some politicians, pop culture idols and others that not only tolerate, but actively promote, as chic and harmless, the recreational use of drugs:

-- **pop music** as a global industry is by far the most influential trend setter for young people of most cultures. Song lyrics advocate the smoking of marijuana or taking other drugs and certain pop stars make statements and set examples as if the use of drugs for non-medical purposes were a normal and acceptable part of a person's lifestyle. The effect of drug-friendly pop music seems to survive even the occasional shock of overdose deaths, as such incidents tend to be seen as an occasion to mourn the loss of an idol and not an opportunity to confront the lethal effect of "recreational" drug use.

-- the **media** portrayal of certain drug issues -- especially the use of marijuana and the issues of liberalization and legalization -- has encouraged rather than prevented abuse. The Board views the overall coverage of the drug problem as far from balanced since influential newspapers and key television stations tend to focus exclusively on the controversial and provocative aspects of the issue. Legalization and liberalization, the advocacy of the medical use of cannabis are the recurring attention grabbers for reports and editorials. The Board's concern is not the coverage of those topics but the fact that only those topics seem to receive highlighted attention.

-- knowledge on how to grow cannabis indoors, or how to make a range of "designer drugs" and which common plants contain hallucinogenic properties was always

available. While in the past, obtaining that knowledge required considerable research through libraries and medical journals, today it comes to our living room. It is at our fingertips through the **Internet**, crossing all national boundaries and defying restrictions on the dissemination of information. The Board is concerned by the fact that there are many different Web pages devoted to the production and manufacture of illicit drugs and news groups for exchanging information not only on making drugs, but also on how to avoid detection, for sharing experiences and for providing support to persons arrested for illegal possession of controlled drugs.

-- the **use of cannabis (hemp)** in foodstuffs and beverages, portrays cannabis as an innocuous, edible or even nutritious substance, and is, in the view of the Board, often just another tactical element in a wider strategy which has as its final aim the legalization of cannabis. In fact, as the Board points out, in their catalogues or advertising campaigns, many marketers of hemp openly admit that their ultimate objective is the legalization of cannabis.

To take on the challenge of a pro-drug environment, Governments are called upon to be more active and innovative. The Board clearly points out that Governments have not only moral but also legal obligations, as specified in the international drug control conventions, to actively counter all forms of "public incitement" that encourage abuse of drugs and psychotropic substances. Governments should take the initiative in the debate on drug issues and not leave the advocacy role only to those who wish to change public attitudes to drug abuse. This is all the more important, as scattered evidence from public opinion polls suggests that the majority of people are not in favour of any form of legalization.

The Board believes that the media as well as the sport and entertainment industry are key players whose assistance should be sought in developing innovative strategies to influence the present "pro-drug" environment. The creation of a culture that is predominantly against drug abuse is the most promising form of prevention in the long term.

The change in public attitude towards tobacco smoking is used as an example by the Board to show that it is possible to influence the public and gradually change the environment. The change in smoking attitudes and thus a considerable drop in tobacco consumption, has required years of efforts on a number of fronts. Therefore, as the Board notes, for drug abuse prevention programmes to be effective: *"they must start early, be comprehensive and*

tailor their messages to the market. They must also be sustained and must maintain their credibility by not exaggerating or understating the consequences of drug abuse".

The Board concludes that if the above principles are followed and sufficient resources are allocated, preventive measures can have a real impact. The Board is realistic in noting that the elimination of all forms of drug

experimentation, use and abuse will never be achieved. However, this should not be a reason to give up the ultimate aim of all prevention efforts, namely a drug-free society." *Most prevention efforts do have an effect and, like commercial advertising, reach enough of the market to have a positive impact. Prevention programmes should be considered successful even though they may not prevent all illicit drug abuse."*