

### The risk of long-term use of opioids

1. Global consumption of opioid analgesics has been increasing in recent decades. In particular, the consumption of fentanyl increased considerably from 2000 particularly in high-income countries. This does not seem to be related to a proportionate increase in the morbidity rate of cancer but rather to the extensive prescribing of strong opioid analgesics for the treatment of chronic non-cancer pain.

2. Overprescribing by medical professionals and aggressive marketing seems to be the main reasons for this development. This phenomenon has contributed to the development of an unprecedented epidemic. In the United States, the number of deaths caused by overdose of opiates has reached historic levels, more than tripling from 1999 to 2016. In 2016, among 63,632 drug overdose deaths, 66 per cent involved opioids. Overdose deaths related to opioids have been observed also in Canada, Australia and, to a lesser extent, in Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

3. The Board has always emphasized the importance of ensuring the rational medical use of opioid analgesics. The need for the adequate availability of controlled drugs for medical and scientific purposes and the role of State parties in ensuring rational prescribing and implementing measures to prevent the diversion and the risk of abuse of these substances. The increase in the abuse of prescription opioids and the consequent increase in overdose deaths has so far been limited to certain countries. All Governments should be aware of the risks associated with the abuse of prescription drugs as they work to ensure that controlled substances are available for medical and scientific purposes. The Board encourages Governments to work together with public health officials, pharmacists, manufacturers and distributors of pharmaceutical products, physicians, consumer protection associations and law enforcement agencies to promote public education about the risks associated with the non-rational use of prescription drugs, their abuse and their potential to cause dependence, in particular prescription drugs containing narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances under international control.

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INCB is the independent, quasi-judicial body charged with promoting and monitoring Government compliance with the three international drug control conventions: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

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For further information, please contact: INCB Secretariat at Tel: (+43-1) 26060 4163  
Email: [incb.secretariat@un.org](mailto:incb.secretariat@un.org), Website: [www.incb.org](http://www.incb.org)