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Factsheet 5

New psychoactive substances and other non-scheduled chemicals represent a clear and present danger

As presented in the latest INCB Annual Report for 2013, abuse of new psychoactive substances (NPS) is spreading, with new substances emerging almost daily. Seventy countries reported the appearance of NPS while others reported the appearance of numerous new non-scheduled precursor chemicals for the illicit manufacture of controlled drugs. This growing trend poses challenges for the regulatory and enforcement authorities. The World Health Organization's (WHO) Expert Committee on Drug Dependence is expected to review 23 new psychoactive substances at its thirty-sixth meeting in June 2014.

Although unprecedented numbers and varieties of NPS have been reported in Europe, and their abuse continues to grow, developing countries are not immune to the problem. In 2012, for example, countries in Africa reported the emergence of NPS such as synthetic cannabinoids. Some countries, such as Colombia, have proactively established early warning systems aimed at identifying and issuing alerts about domestic consumption of NPS. The European Union also maintains an advanced early warning system.

More studies are needed to generate the necessary information so that WHO will be able to assess the health risks posed by NPS and so that the scheduling of these substances can occur more rapidly, if necessary. Whilst there are indications that levels of abuse of some of these substances may have stabilized or declined in a few specific countries in Europe, the level of abuse of NPS in many other countries continues to increase.

In order to complement the initial stages of international action to deal with NPS, the early and systematic sharing of all available operational information at the global level is essential to prevent their trafficking and diversion, to conduct investigations and successful prosecutions. To that end, the INCB has initiated the NPS task force as a multilateral mechanism to communicate strategic and operational intelligence related to trafficking and trade in new psychoactive substances.

INCB is also concerned about the growing threat posed by non-scheduled precursor chemicals used in the illicit manufacture of dangerous drugs. Like new psychoactive substances, the trade in these chemicals is also outside of international control. Communication of incidents involving non-scheduled precursor chemicals via the INCB Precursors Incidents Communication System (PICS) is essential to alert authorities around the world and to prevent their trafficking and diversion.