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Concerns Over Heroin Use for Addicts Remain After Swiss Project Evaluated, INCB Says

VIENNA, 19 May (UN Information Service) -- The following has been re-issued as received today from the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB):

STATEMENT FOR THE PRESS

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), in session now, has examined and commented on the "Report of the External Panel on the Evaluation of the Swiss Scientific Studies of Medically Prescribed Narcotics to Drug Addicts" (hereafter "the Evaluation Report") released in April 1999. The INCB had earlier in 1994 suggested that the Swiss Government seek an independent assessment of the Swiss heroin project from the WHO; this led to the Evaluation Report. Since the publication of the Evaluation Report, the INCB has received numerous requests from the media and the public at large for its opinion of the Evaluation Report, and does not wish to leave these requests unanswered.

The Evaluation Report's conclusory judgement -- with respect to the issues of feasibility vs desirability and heroin vs methadone -- is the following: "The Swiss studies were not able to examine whether improvements in health status or social functioning in the individuals treated were causally related to heroin prescription *per se* or a result of the impact of the overall treatment programme....From a rigorous methodological viewpoint, it is not possible to obtain internally valid results with respect to the research question of heroin prescription being causally responsible....Alternative treatments exist for most medical conditions and, in many cases these alternatives have not been fully evaluated in comparative studies....The main alternative to heroin is methadone and other oral opioids....The Swiss studies suggest that heroin could be considered for patients who persistently fail on methadone. However, the studies have not provided convincing evidence that, even for persistent methadone failures, the medical prescription of heroin generally leads to better outcomes than further methadone-based treatment." (page 11: 6.4)

In her letter of 12 April 1999 to the President of the INCB, the Director-General of the WHO set forth the following conclusions regarding the Swiss heroin project:

- The project was an “observational study without the possibility of making reliable unbiased comparisons between treatment options.”
- The project did “not provide clear evidence for the benefits of heroin treatment over other substitution agents.”
- The project established “no causal link....between prescription of heroin and improvements in health or social status....”
- Therefore, “it is difficult to conclude that the available results of this Swiss study could assist any other country....”

POSITION OF THE INCB

Mindful of its international responsibility as guardian of the global drug-control Conventions, and attentive to the last-cited conclusion of the WHO, the International Narcotics Control Board perceives, in the light of this study, no reason to alter its previously expressed concerns over the Swiss heroin project and policy of heroin prescription, which has not been based on scientific and medical results. It therefore does not encourage other countries to follow this course of action.

The Board has always encouraged scientific research on the medical use of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances, so as to create the knowledge for policy formulation; however, it is also in agreement with the opinion of the 30th WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence, expressed in October 1996, that trials of this type are unlikely to contribute to answering these questions.

The INCB, for its part, will continue to be guided in this matter by the relevant resolutions of the World Health Assembly of 1953 and of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which in 1995 recalled its previous resolutions of 1978 and 1987, in which it had strongly urged Governments to prohibit the use of heroin on human beings.

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