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INCB Expert Group Calls for Measures to Stop Illicit Drug Trade through the Internet

VIENNA, 14 April (UN Information Service) -- Illicit trade of controlled drugs through the internet was the topic of an expert group meeting organized by the International Narcotics Control Board in Vienna from 11 to 13 April 2005. The experts included representatives from international organizations and intergovernmental bodies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Interpol, Universal Postal Union (UPU), Council of Europe, national authorities, professional associations and relevant industries, such as the International Federation of Pharmacists, major data-carrier and internet service providers (MCI) and credit card companies (VISA International).

The meeting concluded that serious national and international efforts were urgently required to counteract the illicit trade of controlled drugs through the internet, in order to prevent an increasing risk of misuse of controlled substances by children and adolescents and to protect individual consumers and public health.

During the discussion, specific cases presented showed that the complexity of the problem was much greater than anticipated. It appeared that the illicit sale of controlled drugs through internet pharmacies relied on sophisticated networks which worked together closely, such as owners of illegal internet pharmacy websites and the suppliers of illicitly-traded goods. Goods sold by illegal internet pharmacies were either illegally manufactured or diverted from the licit distribution chain. It was, therefore, not possible for consumers of those products to determine whether they were receiving the product in the dosage and quality they intended to buy. However, one aspect was certain: such purchases were illegal.

Internet access is global and the number of visitors to the World Wide Web is increasing from day to day. In many countries almost everybody has access to the net and is using it. This makes everybody a potential customer, and a potential victim of illegal internet pharmacies, which will either not check the prescription, or provide one without questions. As they will not verify the information on name and age, vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents as well as those involved in drug trafficking such as drug addicts and dealers can obtain whatever they want with more ease than in the conventional illicit street market.

The experts called for new initiatives in international cooperation to combat this form of illicit drug trade, expressing the need to create an international network of national agencies working together to counteract the global and cross-border activities of illegal internet pharmacies. There was a need for joint activities between countries involved at

the various stages of the illegal process from diversion/illicit manufacturing to the end consumer. Important lessons on methods to be used in international cooperation could be learned from specific cases investigated in joint operations.

The findings and recommendations of the expert group meeting will be discussed at the next session of the International Narcotics Control Board, which will be held in Vienna from 2 to 13 May 2005.

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