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Drugs of Abuse

The following is a brief guide to various drug-related terms, compiled by the United Nations Information Service (UNIS) Vienna. (Note: The descriptions offered are not official definitions.)

Drug Abuse: under the terms of the United Nations Drug Conventions, drug taking without medical justification generally constitutes abuse.

Drug Administration Methods: common forms of administration are inhalation; smoking; ingestion; and subcutaneous, intramuscular or intravenous injection. The mode of administration may be determined by the type of drug, the preference of the user or the influence of tradition.

Multiple Drug Abuse: means either the simultaneous or consecutive use of a number of substances, depending on their availability.

Precursors refers to substances that, without necessarily being drugs themselves, are used in various ways in the processing or manufacture of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. Depending on their principal chemical properties, "precursors" can combine chemically with other substances to produce a drug (or an intermediate form) or can act simply as solvents (for example in drug processing) or acids (in drug salt formation). The 1988 Convention, which places 22 precursors under control, does not use the term "precursor", but refers to "substances frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances". Although not technically correct, it has become common practice to refer to all such substances simply as "precursors".

Drugs of Abuse: medical, pharmacological and legal definitions of narcotic drug and psycho-tropic substance may vary. The International Narcotics Control Board uses the legal understanding of these

terms for control purposes. Thus, narcotic drugs are those covered in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs while psychotropic substances are those listed in the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances. Psychoactive substances are substances with mood and behaviour-altering effects, whether they are controlled by the Conventions or not. The Conventions do not distinguish between "soft" and "hard" drugs and do not use these terms. Other drugs and substances, either entirely or partially outside international control, are also subject to abuse.

A. Narcotic Drugs

At present, control is exercised over some 118 narcotic drugs under the 1961 Convention. These include opium and its derivatives -- morphine, codeine and heroin -- and synthetic narcotics such as methadone and pethidine, as well as cannabis and cocaine.

Opiates

-- opium is the coagulated juice from the unripe capsule of the poppy plant.

-- opium poppy means the plant of the species papaver somniferum L.

-- poppy straw means all parts (except the seeds) of the opium poppy, after mowing.

-- morphine is the main active component of opium. Opium contains approximately 10 per cent morphine. Morphine may be extracted either from opium or directly from poppy straw. Traces of morphine are also found in other plant species.

-- heroin (diacetylmorphine) is obtained from morphine by a chemical process known as acetylation. Chemicals such as acetic anhydride and acetyl chloride are essential for this process.

-- codeine (methyldmorphine) is a chemical derivative of morphine. It occurs in opium in low concentration (approximately 0.5 per cent).

Coca Leaf and Cocaine

-- coca bush means the plant of any species of the genus erythroxylon, an evergreen shrub.

-- coca leaf means the leaf of the coca bush, except a leaf from which all ecgonine, cocaine and any other ecgonine alkaloids have been removed. The leaves are dried and chewed as a stimulant.

-- cocaine is an alkaloid of the coca bush, extracted from the leaves using a solvent, such as kerosene or petrol.

-- coca paste is an intermediary product in the manufacture of cocaine. It usually contains an impure mixture of cocaine sulphate and other alkaloids, and residual plant material. It is usually smoked.

-- cocaine hydrochloride, the most frequently encountered form of cocaine, is made by treating purified coca paste with hydrochloric acid. It is abused by inhalation or injection.

-- crack, a smokeable form of cocaine, is produced by conversion of cocaine hydrochloride to cocaine base using an alkali such as baking soda or ammonia. The effects of crack are identical to, but more powerful than, those of smoking coca paste or inhaling or injecting cocaine hydrochloride.

Cannabis

-- cannabis plant means any plant of the genus cannabis (hemp). It is made up of roots, stems, leaves, seeds and flowering tops which exude a potent resin. The active substance in all parts is tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). The concentration of THC varies widely depending on the part of the plant, the species, the cultivation technique and the growing region.

-- cannabis, according to the 1961 Convention means the "flowering or fruiting tops of the cannabis plant (excluding the seeds and leaves when not accompanied by the top) from which the resin has

not been extracted".

-- cannabis resin means the separate resin, whether crude or purified, obtained from the flowering tops. It is sometimes referred to as hashish although that term is also applied to compacted blocks of flowering tops of cannabis.

-- marijuana refers to cannabis leaves, sometimes mixed with flowering tops in order to increase the drug's potency.

-- cannabis oil is an extract of the tops and resin, with a high concentration of THC.

B. Psychotropic Substances

Some 111 psychotropic substances are controlled by the 1971 Convention. Most of them are contained in pharmaceutical products acting on the central nervous system. The Convention covers hallucinogens, stimulants, sedative hypnotics, tranquilizers, anti-epileptics and analgesics.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens are a chemically diverse group of drugs which produce profound mental changes such as euphoria, anxiety, sensory distortion, vivid visual and auditory hallucinations, changes in behaviour, delusions, paranoid reactions, depression and a sense of identity loss. Examples include mescaline (derived from the peyote cactus), MDMA ("ecstasy", 3-4-methylene-dioxymethamphetamine) and the more widely known lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD).

Stimulants

Amphetamines are the prototype for stimulant drugs. They are in some respect related pharmacologically to cocaine. Like cocaine, they have the capacity to elevate mood and to dispel fatigue and the feeling of hunger. Amphetamines are usually ingested, but methamphetamine in crystalline form (known as "ice") may be smoked like "crack". Fenetylline, cathine and pemoline are examples of internationally controlled stimulants.

Anorectics are preparations intended to treat obesity by suppressing appetite. They often contain amphetamine-type stimulants and are therefore frequently diverted to illicit markets.

Methylphenidate is a central nervous system stimulant, with properties essentially the same as amphetamines. It is prescribed for the treatment of "attention deficit disorder (ADD)" but is also abused as a stimulant.

Depressants, Sedatives, Hypnotics and Tranquilizers

These drugs, which act on the central nervous system, were created to alter behaviour. Almost all depressants now under international control belong to the pharmacological group of barbiturates or benzodiazepines. These drugs are sedatives and in higher dosages induce sleep.

Analgesics

These are drugs used mainly for pain relief. Opium and its derivatives, such as morphine, are among the most powerful acting analgesics. There are also non-opioid analgesics, such as fentanyl, pethidine and aspirin. Aspirin is not under international control and most non-opioid analgesics are controlled under the 1961 Convention. Some analgesics such as buprenorphine and pentazocine are controlled under the 1971 Convention.

C. Other Abused Drugs and Substances

Inhalants

Inhalants are diverse volatile chemicals which produce psychoactive vapours. They are constituents of

a number of common products, including aerosols, gasoline, some glues, solvents and butyl nitrites marketed as "room odourizers". Inhalants are not under international control.

Khat

Khat (catha edulis) is a plant that grows wild or is cultivated mostly in certain regions of East Africa and the Arabian peninsula. Its leaves are chewed for their stimulant properties. Increasing quantities of freeze-dried, vacuum-packed khat are shipped to Europe and elsewhere where it is used mostly by nationals of producing countries. Some countries have introduced measures to restrict its import and/or use. Khat is not currently under international control.

Designer Drugs

Designer Drugs are laboratory-developed drugs, created by altering the chemical structures of controlled parent substances to produce compounds having pharmacological properties similar to, and often more potent than, those of the parent substance. The original intention of manufacturing designer drugs was, by modifying the chemical make-up of the parent drug, to exempt the product from legal control. (Fentanyl and MDMA ("Ecstasy") were designer drugs that are now controlled substances, the former by the 1961 Convention, the latter by the 1971 Convention.)