

and calls upon all States that have not already done so to develop comprehensive strategies to address prescription drug abuse, including mechanisms to ensure the safe return and disposal of medications possessing psychoactive properties, particularly those containing narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. The Board also recommends that States consider expanding these programmes to include all substances having psychoactive properties, whether available with a prescription or without.

249. Although the establishment of safe disposal initiatives is an important tool for addressing prescription drug abuse, that measure alone will not suffice. As such, the Board wishes to reiterate that any comprehensive strategy aimed at tackling the problem of prescription drug abuse must also address the root causes of the excessive supply of prescription drugs, including overprescribing by medical professionals, “doctor shopping” and inadequate controls on the issuing and filling of prescriptions.

## 2. Illegal Internet pharmacies

250. For several years, the Board has drawn the attention of Governments and other members of the international community to the phenomenon of illegal Internet pharmacies and the need to better protect the public against the illegal distribution of preparations containing internationally controlled substances. Substances frequently sold through such pharmacies include opioid analgesics, central nervous system stimulants and tranquillizers. To assist Governments in addressing the problem, the Board developed, with the support and contribution of national experts and relevant international organizations, Internet service providers, financial services and pharmaceutical associations, *Guidelines for Governments on Preventing the Illegal Sale of Internationally Controlled Substances through the Internet*.<sup>19</sup> The guidelines, which were launched in 2009, are aimed at assisting Governments in formulating national legislation and policies for regulatory, law enforcement and other authorities with regard to the use of the Internet to dispense, purchase, export or import internationally controlled substances.

251. To assess the implementation of the guidelines and to obtain information on good practices in addressing the unauthorized sale of internationally controlled substances using the Internet, the Board sent a questionnaire to Governments in March 2013; responses were received from 78 countries and territories throughout the world. Most Governments reported that, on their territory, the

sale of internationally controlled substances by Internet pharmacies was prohibited, and some expressly stated that not allowing Internet pharmacies to operate on their territory had limited the problem.

252. Where Internet pharmacies are permitted, such pharmacies must generally meet the same legislative requirements that are applicable to storefront pharmacies. Some pharmacies do not use the Internet to sell internationally controlled substance, as they consider the risk of diversion to be too large. In some cases, applications to open Internet pharmacies are examined by law enforcement authorities prior to being approved.

253. Many Governments reported having implemented the guideline calling on Governments to adopt national legislation on the designated routing and inspection of mail and other items handled by international courier companies. Legislation and policies in place normally allow border service agencies to examine pharmaceuticals that are shipped by mail. The extent to which consignments of medication containing internationally controlled substances are inspected varies. In some cases, all consignments containing any medicinal product are examined; in others, inspections are carried out at regular intervals with a view to detecting illegal shipments. In addition, countries may have in place specific requirements for the distribution of medicinal products by mail (or as one Government reported) may not allow narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances to be shipped through the postal system unless they are to be used as test or reference standards.

254. One central concern is the potential danger to the health of customers who have procured over the Internet pharmaceutical products containing internationally controlled substances. National efforts have been made to protect such customers from harm. The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, for example, which has members in Canada, New Zealand and the United States, has developed the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (VIPPS) programme, whereby participating pharmacies must comply with a number of licensing and inspection requirements. Each VIPPS pharmacy site is identified by a hyperlink seal displayed on the website; by clicking on the seal, website visitors are able to access verified information about the pharmacy. Similarly, since 2 January 2013, member States of the European Union are required to apply directive 2011/62/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union, which, inter alia, requires each member State to introduce a “common logo” on websites of legally operating online pharmacies. The logo must be clearly displayed on every

<sup>19</sup>United Nations publication, Sales No. E.09.XI.6.

web page of any online pharmacy offering pharmaceutical products containing internationally controlled substances and should allow the identification of the member State in which the online pharmacy has been established.

255. In several countries, particularly in Europe and North America, as well as in Australia and New Zealand, awareness-raising campaigns are regularly carried out, often on the Internet, to inform the public about the potential dangers of ordering pharmaceutical products over the Internet. Websites established specifically for this purpose may include information and verification tools to assist in identifying whether the pharmacy in question is a genuine enterprise. Some websites also have facilities for reporting suspected fake online pharmacies to the relevant authorities.

256. Action against illegal Internet pharmacies involves multiple actors at the national level, usually the Ministry of Health and law enforcement agencies and, in many cases, other ministries such as the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry of Technology or the Ministry of Justice. An effective response therefore requires the collaboration of those Government agencies, as well as fruitful cooperation within the private sector, particularly among Internet service providers.

257. When asked about good practices in addressing the problem of illegal Internet pharmacies, Governments cited regular monitoring of the Internet and the investigation of suspected illegal pharmacies. Several Governments also reported examples of successful cooperation at the national and international levels that had resulted in the seizure of internationally controlled substances and the dismantling of organizations trafficking in such substances.

258. One example of effective international action is Operation Pangea, an annual operation that is coordinated by the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), involves the World Customs Organization, the Permanent Forum on International Pharmaceutical Crime, the Heads of Medicines Agencies Working Group of Enforcement Officers, the Pharmaceutical Security Institute and the European Police Office (Europol) and is supported by the Center for Safe Internet Pharmacies, as well as companies in the private sector. Six such operations have been carried out since 2008. The latest, a one-week operation carried out in June 2013, resulted in the shutdown of more than 9,000 websites, in addition to the suspension of the payment facilities of illegal pharmacies and the disruption of a substantial number of spam messages.

259. The results of the Board's 2013 survey on illegal Internet pharmacies also highlighted the digital divide. Most of the respondents were from regions in which a high percentage of the population uses the Internet, such as Europe and North America. Respondents from other regions often expressed a lack of awareness of illegal Internet pharmacies and of action that could be taken against them. According to the International Telecommunication Union, however, between 2009 and 2013, the number of households with Internet access grew fastest in developing countries—average annual growth was 27 per cent in Africa—and 15 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, the Arab States and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Those growth rates underscore the need to increase public awareness in those regions of the dangers of illegal Internet pharmacies and to strengthen activities to build the capacity of authorities involved in responding to crime involving the Internet.

260. Since 2004, the Board has been collecting information from Governments on activities and measures targeting illegal Internet pharmacies. As illegal Internet pharmacies are a global challenge, strengthened international action is required to effectively address the problem. The Board calls on Governments to continue to provide it with information on the subject and to develop and promote good practices in that area so that sustained action can be taken against the problem.

### 3. Global developments in the non-medical use of tramadol

261. The Board welcomes the adoption of Commission on Narcotic Drugs resolution 56/14, on tramadol, in which the Commission highlighted the concerns of Member States with respect to the expansion of the illicit manufacture and the illicit domestic and international distribution of tramadol in some countries, as well as the risk of illicit use of tramadol and its potential exploitation by trafficking organizations. The Board highlighted in its annual report for 2012 that abuse of tramadol, a synthetic opioid not under international control, had become a serious problem in a number of African countries, notably in North Africa. In 2013, large seizures in Africa were once again reported.

262. In its resolution 56/14, the Commission invited the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) to consider incorporating in its annual report for 2013 information on global developments in the non-medical use and abuse, illicit manufacture and illicit domestic and international distribution of tramadol.