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INCB DATA RECONFIRM INEQUITIES IN ACCESS TO MEDICINES CONTAINING CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES

Unequal access to and availability of affordable opioid analgesics, such as morphine, is a persistent problem, according to analysis of treaty-based data reported by Governments to INCB.

Levels of consumption of opioids for pain management remain far higher in Western and Central Europe, North America and Oceania than in all other regions. Levels of consumption in other regions are insufficient to adequately meet the medical needs of the populations. In 2023, this was of particular concern in East and South-East Asia, Central America and the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa.

The regional imbalances do not stem from a shortage of opiate raw materials with global supply exceeding the demand reported to INCB by Governments. However, the estimated requirements of several countries may not accurately reflect actual medical needs.

INCB urges opioid-manufacturing countries to increase the manufacture of morphine preparations for use in pain management and palliative care, and also to make them more broadly available and more affordable, in particular in low- and middle-income countries.

Only an estimated ten per cent of people with opioid use disorder have access to opioid agonist therapy. In some countries with a high prevalence of people who inject drugs and opioid use disorder, consumption of methadone and buprenorphine and the availability of opioid agonist therapy services are limited or non-existent. In view of the increase in non-medical use of opioids and the associated negative health and social consequences, INCB encourages countries to develop programmes and services to address the problem, including use of controlled substances such as methadone and buprenorphine for treatment and opioid agonist therapy services.

Medicines controlled under the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 play a crucial role in managing various health conditions, including ADHD, anxiety, narcolepsy and neurological disorders such as epilepsy and sleep disorders. While online pharmacies and medical consultations have made access to medications more convenient, they have also contributed to non-rational prescribing practices. At the same time, there is a lack of access to essential medicines, stigma surrounding mental health in general and the unbalanced allocation of healthcare resources.

The 2024 Report highlights challenges in providing access to internationally controlled substances for medical purposes during humanitarian emergencies caused by armed conflict. The drug control treaties allow for the expedited movement of controlled substances for medical use during emergencies. INCB is calling upon States exercising effective control of foreign territories in the context of armed conflict to take urgent action to ensure unimpeded access to medications, including those containing internationally controlled substances. INCB also calls upon such States to continue to provide access to controlled substances for opioid agonist therapy if such treatment was provided prior to occupation.