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POPPY STRAW ABUSE ON THE RISE IN EASTERN EUROPE

Board Calls for Efficient and Specific Control Measures

Serious abuse of poppy straw extracts exists at present in a number of eastern European countries, where it is one of the main substances abused by addicts. Having undertaken a review of the abuse of extracts of poppy straw and of the controls of poppy straw currently applied by national drug control administrations, the 1997 Report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) points to alarming results. For example, poppy straw extracts are abused by 75 per cent of registered addicts in Belarus, by 90 per cent in Lithuania, 72 per cent in the Republic of Moldova, 75 per cent in Poland and up to 80 per cent in the Ukraine. The increasing HIV prevalence in those countries is partially attributed to the prevailing practice of intravenous injection of those extracts.

The review found that in the major producing countries -- Australia, France, Spain and Turkey -- poppy straw production has been efficiently controlled by the introduction of a licensing system and penal sanctions limiting the diversion and misuse of the straw. However, in a number of other countries, especially in eastern Europe, adequate control measures are lacking. Therefore, in its 1997 Report, the Board reiterates the need for enhanced control over poppy straw as well as over poppy cultivation sites. In particular, it calls on those Governments that have not yet done so to consider introducing a general licensing system similar to the control system established in the main countries producing poppy straw material.

The opium poppy is cultivated for opium or for its seeds, as well as for its straw. Until the discovery of an

economically feasible method for the extraction of morphine from poppy straw in Hungary in the 1930s, the straw was an agricultural waste product which was burned, or at best used as stable litter or cattle food. The straw was considered unlikely to be employed as raw material by clandestine manufacturers of morphine, and therefore only limited control measures were included in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961. In contrast, comprehensive and strict controls were provided for opium, the principal opiate raw material at that time. Due to considerably improved technologies for the extraction of alkaloids from poppy straw, however, poppy straw has today become the main source of morphine and other opiates for licit uses, and has by far surpassed opium in its importance as a raw material for natural opiates. Thus, of the 237 tonnes of opiates (in morphine equivalent) manufactured worldwide for licit purposes in 1996, 151 tonnes were obtained from poppy straw whereas only 86 tonnes were obtained from opium.

As a result of horticultural research and development of plant breeding, the morphine content of the straw has also increased considerably over recent years: while in the 1960s the average yield of morphine was not higher than 0.2 per cent of the quantity of straw used, yields of up to 1.3 per cent are now achieved in the major producer countries. It is in light of those developments and in order to prevent diversion and abuse, that the Board has recommended that Governments introduce more efficient and specific control measures over poppy straw.

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The entire text of the INCB Report can be found on INCB's Home Page

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