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Global Drug Control Has Succeeded, But Fresh Challenges Loom, INCB Says

Major Problems Include Questionable Drug Marketing and Prescription Practices

VIENNA, 23 February (UN Information Service) -- While international treaties have prevented further spread of the drug scourge, major challenges facing future control include computer-made illicit substances, the frequent overprescription of psychotropic drugs and more widespread use of cannabis.

New technologies have boosted drug control efforts, but criminal drug dealers have also exploited them to expand their trade, according to the latest report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

Dealers can easily design new drugs by "manipulating" molecules on a computer or they can quickly learn how to make illicit substances through the Internet. Now, illegal drugs can even be sold at low risk through facilities such as the World Wide Web.

The INCB report urges governments to work closely with the Internet industry, community groups, families and educators to help ensure that these technologies are not misused to spread drug abuse.

Another major problem facing global drug control is the low availability for medical use of some substances, such as morphine, codeine and other opioids to relieve pain, particularly in developing countries. Average daily use in 20 nations where these pain-relievers were used the most from 1992 to 1996 was 17,450 DDD (defined daily dose) per 1 million people, compared to only 184 DDD per 1 million in 20 nations that used them the least. This huge gap in usage is similar for psychotropic drugs -- mind-altering medicines such as stimulants and benzodiazepines ("bennies").

High per capita use of some psychotropic drugs in industrialized countries may mean they are being used without proper medical diagnosis, the report says, or in developing nations that they are being sold on "parallel markets", due to a drastic lack of pharmacies or other health care facilities. Governments should make developing medical services and pharmaceutical supply systems a public health priority, ensuring that good prescribing and dispensing practices are followed, the INCB urges.

Narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances are also marketed in a questionable way through "food products" and "dietary supplements", the report says. And some attempts have been made to circumvent drug control measures by using loopholes in national pharmaceutical laws for products containing psychoactive substances.

The report also points to the widespread use of cannabis in virtually all countries. The 1961 international drug treaty, which limits cannabis and other substances with little medical value but high abuse potential to medical and scientific purposes, needs to be strictly applied, the INCB says.

Campaigns to curb cannabis use should highlight its dangers, correct the false image it has for many young people and governments should sponsor more research on the drug, the report says.

Successes in Curbing Global Drug Abuse

International treaties have almost completely stopped legal drugs from being diverted to illegal trafficking routes and abuse has never again reached those epidemic levels of the last century or the beginning of this one in some countries.

Control of psychotropic substances has met with slightly less success, due mainly to less stringent measures favouring some industrial and commercial interests. However, the number of prescriptions for barbiturates and other hypnotics -- in some countries the most frequently used drugs for suicide — as well as amphetamines has dropped considerably since the 1971 treaty entered into force. Using large amounts of amphetamines to treat conditions such as depression and obesity, for example, is now considered medically inappropriate.

The 1988 international drug treaty has sparked concrete measures against trafficking and abuse of drugs, including judicial cooperation, extradition of traffickers, controlled deliveries and action against the laundering of money derived from illicit drug trafficking.

Chemicals, also called precursors, used to make drugs of abuse have been far better controlled through the 1988 treaty. The treaty includes the precursors ergotamine, ergometrine and ephedrine, for example, which has prevented the illicit manufacture of millions of street doses of LSD and methamphetamine as well as other amphetamine-type stimulants.

The 1998 treaty also controls and monitors reagents and solvents, such as acetic anhydride and potassium permanganate, which has helped enforcers find a number of clandestine laboratories illegally making cocaine and heroin.

The report notes that governments now seem more determined to address drug abuse. The 1998 treaty entered into force in only two years, compared to five for the 1971 treaty. Global adherence to the treaties could be possible in the near future, the report says.

Nations are complying more with all three treaties, which form the basis for national drug control strategies in the vast majority of countries. And a better understanding of drug-related problems has boosted cooperation between different professions and national authorities.

With no international or national laws, the non-medical use of drugs would have matched other psychoactive substances sold and used with little or no restriction, such as tobacco or alcohol. These two substances have killed millions of individuals each year and led to various types of criminal acts.

Avoiding Epidemics of the Past

Without international drug controls, the addiction epidemics in some countries in the first few decades of this century would have continued and spread to many other countries. The success of the treaties should override suggestions that society could save money by leaving drug control in the hands of market economy forces -- similar to questioning the economy of preventing car accidents or treating infectious diseases, the report notes.

The uncontrolled sale of pharmaceutical products in the United States before the Harrison Narcotics Act was adopted in 1914 allowed vast quantities of unprescribed drugs on the market. Only 3 to 8 per cent of cocaine sold in New York, Boston and other cities was used in medicine or dentistry, according to a 1902 report. The number of patent medicines with “secret ingredients” was estimated at 50,000 in 1905, but a large proportion of those products contained cocaine, opium, morphine or other dangerous drugs, the Board reports.

The total number of cocaine and heroin deaths in the United States exceeded 5,000 in 1912, according to a government report, mainly due to easy access to these drugs. More than 1,000 manufacturers were marketing products containing either opium, morphine, heroin or cocaine in 1914 and about 90 per cent of narcotic drugs were used for non-medical purposes, the report states.

Great Britain and other colonial powers forced China to abandon its efforts to curb the opium trade after the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, when importing the drug became legal and opium began to flow freely from British India into China, the report says.

By 1906, 30,000 tonnes of opium were being produced in the country and 3,500 tonnes were being imported. Consumption in China alone at that time is estimated to have been more than 3,000 tonnes in morphine equivalent, compared to the worldwide medical use today of about 230 tonnes in morphine equivalent per year and illicit trade of opiates of about 380 tonnes.

Domestic production of opium had dropped and imports of the drug from India stopped by 1914, but it was still smuggled into the country to feed China's more than 10 million addicts -- out of a total population of 450 million -- at that time.

Opiate addiction today is serious, but far less widespread than the epidemics that flourished when narcotic drugs were freely available. Epidemics such as these should not be allowed to recur, the INCB report stresses.

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