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Europeans Taking ‘Downers’; Americans Taking ‘Uppers’

VIENNA, 23 February (UN Information Service) -- Europeans are the world's top users of stress-reducing drugs and Americans -- North and South -- record-consumers of performance-enhancing substances or stimulants, according to this year's report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

Stress-reducing drugs, or benzodiazepines, are used by as much as 10 per cent of the populations of some European countries, with people over 65 taking the largest amounts of these drugs. Many Europeans in this age group have retired and no longer suffer professional stress, but may use the drugs to cope with isolation or threatening changes in life routine, the Board suggests. But treating these symptoms with benzodiazepines can be dangerous, since those substances have a high abuse and dependency potential.

In the Americas, particularly in the United States, performance enhancing drugs are given to children to boost school performance or help them conform with the demands of school life. They are also taken by adults to achieve the desired body image, boost athletic prowess and social skills or enhance sexual performance.

Americans use considerably more stimulants than people in other regions, particularly amphetamine-type substances for dieting and methylphenidate, mainly the drug Ritalin, to treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children. ADHD patients in the United States are consuming a total of 330 million defined daily doses (DDD), compared to a total of about 65 million DDDs for patients in all other parts of the world, the INCB states.

Treatment rates for ADHD in some American schools are as high as 30 to 40 per cent of a class and children as young as one year are treated with methylphenidate. The Board is concerned that these drugs are being prescribed without heeding their abuse and dependency potential.

The INCB notes that American culture and its drug-taking behaviour have a strong influence on other regions. Methylphenidate use for children has rapidly increased in Australia, Canada and several European countries, particularly in nations where diagnosis by a specialist is not required.

Using amphetamine-type stimulants for dieting is reportedly increasing in Asia, as is the trafficking and abuse of both licitly and illicitly made variations of these drugs, the INCB reports.

The number of psychoactive drugs -- synthetic mind-altering medicines such as stimulants and

benzodiazepines -- used to help people cope with life's demands or enhance psychological well being has rapidly increased during the second half of this century. Several of these substances, due to their abuse and addiction potential, are listed in the 1971 international drug control treaty.

High use of performance enhancing drugs in the Americas could be at least partly explained by a prevalent sense of competition, the INCB says. Use of these drugs seems linked to culture and lifestyle. Theories to explain differences between regions range from medical and prescription practices to societal structure, such as the size of various age groups.

Drug use may reflect a culture's impact on the patient-doctor relationship, the INCB says. European doctors may be reluctant to prescribe amphetamines due to reminiscences of the wide abuse of these drugs during the 1960s and 1970s, but are less concerned about benzodiazepines. For their US colleagues, the collective memory of amphetamine abuse seems to have faded, but they are more cautious with benzodiazepines than Europeans.

Aggressive advertising by certain pharmaceutical firms strongly affects prescribing and consuming behaviour, according to the INCB. And information technology, including the Internet, has rapidly spread drug consuming trends from one region to another without full investigation of appropriateness and long-term effects.

The Board recommends that the medical community, health officials and consumer protection groups play a more active role in determining how much of these drugs should be consumed in their countries. Treatment with drugs may often just be the easy way out, rather than dealing with the cause of the problem.

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