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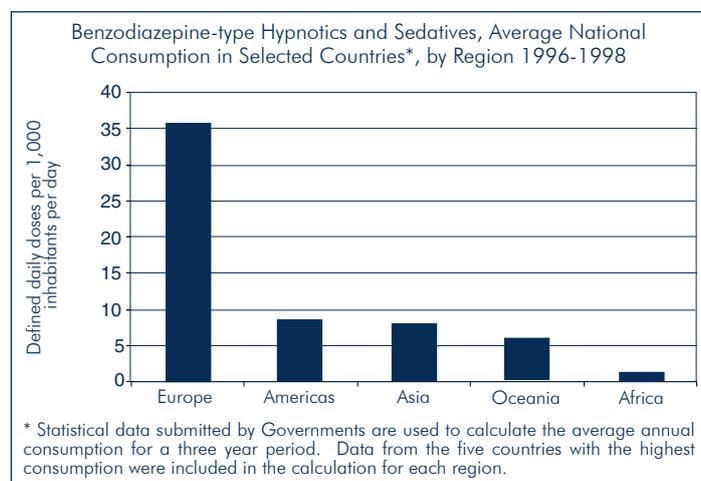
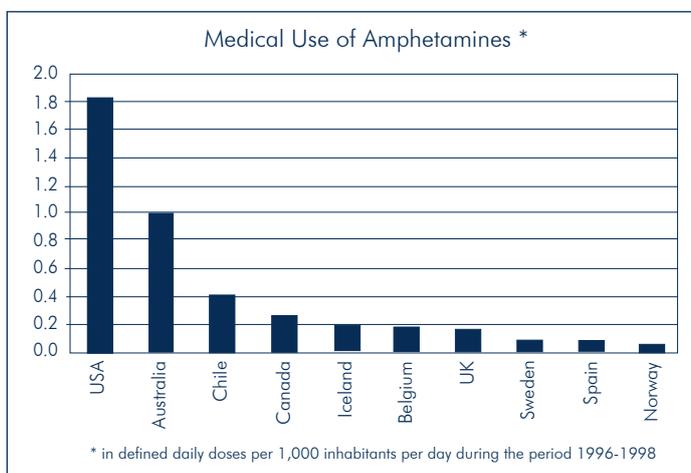
EUROPEANS CONTINUE TO CONSUME SEDATIVES AND HYPNOTICS; AMERICANS REMAIN THE MAIN USERS OF STIMULANTS

Overmedication and abuse may be behind the high consumption levels of psychotropic substances in Europe and the Americas, states the annual report of the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) released on 23 February 2000.

The Board, which regularly monitors the world wide use of such substances, draws attention to the fact that the per-capita consumption of amphetamines and other central nervous system stimulants is the highest in the world in North America, while Europe is the biggest consumer of benzodiazepine-type hypnotics and sedatives.

Over the last few decades accepted therapeutic uses of amphetamines have become rare and as a result almost all countries in the world report declining medical use of such substances. Not so the United

States where medical use of dexamphetamine and amphetamine increased significantly during the 1990s. According to the INCB, consumption of amphetamines in the United States is more than 10 times higher than in any European country in terms of mean daily dosages. The United States also has the world's highest per capita consumption of methylphenidate, the stimulant contained in Ritalin, a drug widely used in a controversial way for the treatment of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in children and adults.



Europe, on the other hand, occupies first place when it comes to the medical use of hypnotics, sedatives or anxiolytics of the benzodiazepine-type. The calculated average national per capita consumption of benzodiazepines, is three times higher in Europe than that of the United States.

There are also considerable variations between European countries. A recent study revealed that doctors in France prescribe about four times more sedatives, hypnotics and tranquilizers than doctors in Germany or the United Kingdom. Several of these substances are abused as substitutes for heroin or in addition to heroin.

Sometimes aggressive pharmaceutical marketing and advertising as well as improper medical practice are among the crucial factors that facilitate or directly drive the excessive availability of psychotropic substances. The vast gulf of different usage is as yet unexplained but, as the Board notes, may be because of cultural differences between countries and regions. In addition, the symptoms for which psychotropic substances are prescribed, such as insomnia and anxiety, are often of a personal and social nature rather than due to recognized medical conditions. The medical profession thus finds itself in the difficult situation of providing pharmacological treatment for non-medical problems.

In the report the Board recommends that Governments should carefully monitor prescription practices. The Board also appeals to the pharmaceutical industry to act responsibly by providing objective information about the effects of such drugs.

Oversupply and overmedication of psychotropic substances will be a central issue for the next INCB report. This year the focus is on the undersupply of narcotic drugs for medical purposes in many countries.

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