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CANNABIS ABUSE ON THE RISE

Once a "hippie drug", whose use was confined to small groups, cannabis is becoming abused by large population groups, primarily the young, warns the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its latest annual report released on 23 February 2000. The Board is especially concerned over the easy availability of very potent cannabis varieties and detailed cannabis cultivation instructions and paraphernalia. In many countries these can be obtained in so-called "hemp shops" or through the Internet. The unregulated sale of cannabis seeds and growing paraphernalia has also led to an upsurge in indoor cannabis cultivation.

The increasingly widespread abuse of cannabis is particularly apparent in Europe. In Switzerland the prevalence of cannabis abuse among 15-year-old pupils in secondary schools has quadrupled in the past 12 years. In France, one third of pupils in secondary schools have experimented with cannabis. The figure for Paris was more than 40 per cent. Half of those who experiment, abuse it regularly. In Germany, 69 percent of juveniles participating in techno parties have taken cannabis.

The Board calls on Governments to continue to emphasize the dangers of cannabis abuse in the framework of drug prevention activities. Permissive attitudes towards cannabis must not be allowed to develop, particularly at a time when increasingly potent cannabis has appeared on the illicit market.

As regards the ongoing public debate on the possible medical use of cannabis, the Board in its report reiterates its call for objective scientific research stressing that this issue must be approached scientifically and not be influenced by subjective opinion. Should the medical usefulness of cannabis be established, however, the substance would continue to be subject to licensing and other control measures required by the international drug control treaties in the same way as all other drugs used for medical purposes, for example morphine or codeine.

The international community decided in 1961 to include cannabis in the list of drugs controlled under the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, based on the evidence of its harmfulness to health and its dependence liability. Since that time, new technologies have been developed which make it possible to grow increasingly potent cannabis varieties. These may have a content of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active ingredient of the cannabis plant, of up to 25 percent. Therefore, the Board states that cannabis abuse should by no means be treated as harmless or even inevitable.

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