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INTERNET SHOPPING: TRAFFICKING GOES ON-LINE

The Internet is becoming a growing source of on-line trafficking as it seems to provide easy access to controlled drugs. The UN's international drug control body in its just released annual report warns that on-line drugstores/pharmacies illegally provide prescription drugs, including internationally controlled substances, to their clients all over the world without demanding the required prescriptions.

Not only expanding Internet sales but also the open advertisement of illegal purchase of drugs cause concern for the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). Some of the companies explicitly advertise that they provide prescription drugs without prescription or that the dispensing pharmacy will issue the prescription at order.

The Board clearly states that advertisements and sales which promote illicit access to controlled substances are in violation of international treaties and obstruct national legislation. Illicitly operating Internet companies act in full awareness of the illegal nature of their trading. They operate under the assumption that due to the large number of mail internationally shipped, only a fraction of such shipments can be detected.

Internet trading in itself is not the problem. In some countries, Internet shopping/mail deliveries of internationally controlled substances is considered to be a licit drug supply channel as long as it conforms to all control requirements. Such use of the Internet/mail to ascertain adequate supply of medical provisions to all citizens can be found in countries, such as Australia, where geographical conditions make it difficult for traditional supply channels to adequately reach all parts of the country, including the most remote ones.

Internet shopping and mail deliveries of controlled substances is an illegal activity in all cases where international treaties and corresponding national legislation are contravened, e.g. if the Internet company does not have a license to deal in controlled substances; if such substances are dispensed without mandatory prescription; if the controlled substance is advertised to the general public; if controlled substances are shipped in mislabeled or inadequately labeled letters and parcels; and if the regulations of various countries concerning the import and export are not observed.

Thailand and US cooperate to close down Internet pharmacies

A major example of well concerted bilateral cooperation with regard to illicit sales of controlled substances through the Internet was a joint effort of Thai and US authorities to detect and close down on-line pharmacies located in Thailand which mainly delivered to the US market. US authorities became aware of frequent illicit mail deliveries of controlled substances to the United States in letters and parcels from Thailand. The US citizens receiving such letters and parcels were persons, many of them drug addicts, who could not obtain the mandatory prescriptions for these substances from medical doctors in the United States. With the help of the US Drug Enforcement Administration and the Thai postal administration, the Thai authorities discovered that two Bangkok and one Chiangmai based Internet pharmacies were the senders of those letters and parcels. These Internet pharmacies advertised on their web sites a variety of preparations containing alprazolam, diazepam, lorazepam, flunitrazepam, pentazocine, phentermine and codeine. The involved Internet pharmacies were raided and closed down by the Thai authorities between November 1999 and January 2000.

Sale of controlled drugs through the Internet is a global problem. Counteraction requires close coordination of activities of national authorities. However, the problem of Internet shopping is quite recent for national authorities. With estimated 600 million Internet users at present and considering significant increases in the number of Internet users in the near future, cost effective countermeasures need to be coordinated at regional and international levels.

Only a limited number of countries have already taken specific legal action to prevent the misuse of the Internet. Even for countries where such legislation exists, different laws and regulations in other countries make it very difficult to consistently identify, investigate, sanction and ultimately prevent the illicit use of the Internet. Countries which have already established the required legal framework to close down such Internet sites and control access to the Internet service providers are obstructed in their efforts to stop such illicit trading by activities of Internet companies operating from countries where no such legal provisions are in place.

National activities will only have a limited impact without concerted international action. The Board hopes that countries will consider introducing legislative changes to allow prosecution of illicit Internet pharmacies and drugstores. Governments should explore the possibility of elaborating common legal standards in this area and coordinate activities of their law enforcement authorities against the misuse of the Internet and mail deliveries. The Board invites all governments to review their national legislation and identify modifications to prevent the misuse of the Internet and mail deliveries for illegal distribution of controlled substances.