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TOO MUCH MORPHINE AND OTHER LICIT OPIATES PRODUCED WORLDWIDE BUT STILL NOT AVAILABLE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

There is a danger of the worldwide legal market in opiates for pain relief getting out of control with supply currently exceeding demand, according to the INCB Annual Report published today (26 February). The Board is warning that cultivation and production levels are far in excess of medical consumption and there is an increased risk that stocks could be diverted into the illegal drugs market.

The Board says new countries such as the United Kingdom should not start producing licit opiates because there is already too much being cultivated and produced. Governments permitting licit opiate cultivation should reduce the amount produced and countries including Australia, Spain, France and Hungary should not allow market forces to dictate what happens but should act in accordance with the international drug control conventions. The Board stresses the important role of the traditional supplier countries of opiate raw material such as India and Turkey.

The world's licit opiate market which supplies essential pain-relieving drugs is about the same size as the illegal heroin and opium market with around 400 tons in morphine equivalent of opiates being produced annually. Only a limited number of countries grow licit opiates and it has been successfully regulated until now to ensure that sufficient quantities are produced for medical purposes worldwide and that drugs are not diverted to illicit channels.

Despite the worldwide surplus of licit opiates for pain relief, these opiates are often not available in many developing countries. Medical consumption of morphine has increased in the developed world and 10 countries account for 80 per cent of morphine consumed worldwide. The Board has raised its concerns about the lack of availability in some countries in its report three years ago but the situation remains the same. The Board is calling on governments and the World Health Organization to reduce the barriers to better availability of licit opiates in developing countries.