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INCB WARNS OF COUNTERFEIT MEDICINES FLOODING MARKETS

Action needs to be taken to curb unregulated market, Board warns in Annual Report

The Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) today warned that the flood of counterfeit medicines now available in many countries could have fatal consequences for consumers. In its Annual Report released today (1 March 2007), the Board also called on member States to enforce legislation to ensure that narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances are not illegally manufactured or diverted from licit manufacture and distribution channels to unregulated markets.

The danger of unregulated markets is the theme of chapter one of the Annual Report. The Board is calling for it to be addressed on a priority basis. The existence of unregulated markets means that substandard, and sometimes even lethal medication is sold to the unsuspecting consumer. Unregulated markets are often supplied with stolen and diverted drugs, illicitly manufactured pharmaceuticals or through illegal sales on the Internet and distributed through the mail and courier services.

Apart from consumers who purchase pharmaceuticals containing controlled substances on the unregulated market because of limited access to health care facilities or lower prices, persons dependent on and abusing such medications make use of unregulated markets to obtain them without prescription.

“Besides the fact that the existence of unregulated markets, the sale of diverted and counterfeit drugs and the purchase of drugs containing controlled substances without prescription contravenes international treaties on drug control, it is important for consumers to realize that what they think is a cut-price medication bought on an unregulated market may however have potentially lethal effects whenever the consumed drugs are not the genuine product or are taken without medical advice. Instead of healing, they can take lives,” said Dr. Philip O. Emafo, President, INCB.

This danger is real and sizeable. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 25-50 per cent of medicines consumed in developing countries are believed to be counterfeit. The problem is further compounded by the fact that counterfeit drugs are easy to manufacture – they can resemble genuine drugs in packaging, and labelling. Unknowing clients have experienced serious health or even lethal consequences; for instance, in Africa, the use of counterfeit vaccines in 1995 resulted in 2,500 deaths. Narcotics, benzodiazepines, amphetamines and other internationally controlled drugs are easily available in street markets in several developing countries. In developed countries, these drugs are sold via illegal Internet pharmacies, without the mandatory prescriptions.

“The problem of counterfeit medication and abuse of pharmaceuticals containing controlled substances bought without prescriptions, has been in existence for some time. However, the rapid expansion of unregulated markets has dramatically worsened the situation,” said Dr. Emafo.



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The unregulated market broadly covers two scenarios: unlicensed individuals and/or entities conducting illegal trade of pharmaceutical products containing controlled substances – for instance, a street vendor selling a controlled drug, such as a narcotic drug, a stimulant or a sedative in a village fair; and, licensed individuals and/or entities contravening laws to sell controlled drugs, such as a pharmacist who sells controlled drugs without asking for a prescription.

The Board has called on member States to enforce existing legislation, to impede this menace, and also take appropriate measures to increase the availability of medicinal drugs through legitimate channels, particularly in areas where there is lack of access.