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ABUSE OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS TO SURPASS ILLICIT DRUG ABUSE, SAYS INCB

Board warns that deaths related to overdose of prescription drugs on the rise

The abuse and trafficking of prescription drugs is set to exceed illicit drug abuse, warned the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in its Annual Report released today (1 March 2007). The Board added that medication containing narcotic drugs and/or psychotropic substances is even a drug of first choice in many cases, and not abused as a substitute. Such prescription drugs have effects similar to illicit drugs when taken in inappropriate quantities and without medical supervision. The “high” they provide is comparable to practically every illicitly manufactured drug.

The abuse of prescription drugs has already surpassed abuse of traditional illicit drugs such as heroin and cocaine in some parts of the world says the Board. For example, in the United States, the abuse of prescription drugs, including pain killers, stimulants, sedatives and tranquillizers has gone beyond the abuse levels of practically all illicit drugs, with the exception of cannabis. The abuse rate is higher than that of drugs such as MDMA (“ecstasy”), cocaine, methamphetamine and heroin. The number of Americans who abuse controlled prescription drugs nearly doubled from 7.8 million to 15.1 million from 1992 to 2003. Abuse of a painkiller, Oxycodone (OxyContin®), increased by almost 40 per cent, to an annual prevalence of 5.5 per cent among students in their final year of secondary school from 2002 to 2005. Hydrocodone (Vicodin®) is also widely abused, with a prevalence of 7.4 per cent among college students in 2005.

Parts of Africa, South Asia and Europe are also facing this problem. In Nigeria, for instance, pentazocine, an analgesic, is the second most common drug injected. Buprenorphine, an analgesic and a drug prescribed for substitution treatment of drug dependency, is the main drug of injection in most areas of India and trafficked and abused in tablet form in France and Scandinavian countries. In France, between 20 and 25 per cent of buprenorphine (Subutex®) might be diverted to the illicit market.

The demand for these drugs is so high, that it has given rise to a new problem – that of counterfeit products. Strong demand on the illicit markets of Scandinavia for flunitrazepam (Rohypnol®), a sedative, is increasingly met by illicitly manufactured counterfeit preparations. The demand of the illicit market in North America for OxyContin® has led to distribution of counterfeit products containing illicitly manufactured fentanyl.

An equally serious consequence is that abuse of prescription drugs can have lethal effects. An increasing number of deaths related to abuse of narcotic drugs, including fentanyl and oxycodone have been recorded in North America and Europe.

“Most countries do not have any mechanism to systematically collect data to document this abuse, and are not aware to what extent drugs are being diverted and abused,” said Dr. Philip O. Emafo, President, INCB. “In addition, what abusers do not realize is that abuse of prescription drugs can be more risky than the abuse of illicitly manufactured drugs. The very high potency of some of the synthetic narcotic



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drugs available as prescription drugs presents in fact a higher overdose risk than the abuse of illicit drugs,” he added.

Aggravating this risk, is the tendency of drug abusers to create their own recipes – for instance, they remove, with the help of instructions freely available on Internet sites, the active substances from high-dosage formulations and separate drugs from inactive ingredients, making them even more potent.

Also, the widespread availability of pharmaceutical preparations in many countries allows drug abusers to obtain such preparations easily. The increasing use of the World Wide Web as a global drug market has further contributed to the spread in the abuse of prescription drugs.

“The Board invites all Governments to alert their law enforcement officers to the rising trafficking and abuse of pharmaceutical products containing controlled substances. The Board also recommends providing adequate information to law enforcement and health authorities as well as to the general public on the risks and possible consequences of their abuse so as to ensure a realistic risk perception,” said Dr. Emafo.

The Board is requesting Governments to systematically collect data on seized pharmaceutical products and to include the abuse of pharmaceutical preparations in the surveys aiming at establishing the extent and types of drug abuse.