

Current Supply of Legal Opium Adequate to Meet World Demand, Says INCB President

VIENNA, 12 November (UN Information Service) -- The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), currently in session in Vienna, has started its review of the global situation of the licit production, manufacture and consumption of narcotic drugs.

Narcotic drugs in general and opiate analgesics (such as morphine or codeine) in particular are essential in the treatment of moderate to severe pain. Ensuring the availability of opiates for medical and scientific purposes is an important part of the mandate of INCB.

Currently, global demand for opiates for medical purposes is fully satisfied. As for the past five years, total supply (production and stocks) of opiate raw materials has exceeded the total demand for opiates needed for medical and scientific purposes. For 2007, supply of opiate raw materials is estimated to exceed demand by about 550 metric tons in morphine equivalent.

However, some countries consume more opiates than others. In 2006, Europe and North America accounted for 89 per cent of the global consumption of morphine. The low levels of consumption of morphine and other opioid analgesics for the treatment of pain in the remaining countries, particularly developing countries, continue to be a matter of great concern to INCB. The factors involved in their underuse, described extensively in the Board's Report for 1999 and in the literature, include attitude, knowledge of health care professionals, and some regulatory, economic and procurement impediments. A recent survey among Governments conducted by INCB has revealed that concerns about fear of addiction and reluctance to prescribe are the most often cited factors affecting opioid availability. To address these issues, INCB has worked with the World Health Organization to develop a framework to address these problems which is expected to provide effective assistance to Governments in accessing opioid analgesics for the management of pain.

The declining role of opium as a raw material in the manufacture of opioid analgesics by the pharmaceutical industry is a trend noted by INCB. Production of licit opium has been decreasing since 2000, reaching 345 metric tons in 2005. "Today, about 15 per cent of opiates worldwide are manufactured from opium", said INCB President Philip Emafo. To prevent a further accumulation of stocks, India, the largest producer of licit opium in the world, has significantly reduced over the past years the area of cultivated opium poppy.

Details on the licit production and consumption of opium for 2006 will be published by the Board in the technical report on narcotic drugs to be issued in early 2008.

In its deliberations on drugs and their uses for medical purposes, INCB will also examine the consumption of other narcotic drugs. The use of methadone, for example, has increased more than three times over the past decade due to its growing use in maintenance treatment related to opioid dependency.

As increased availability of narcotic drugs raises the risk of diversion and abuse of these drugs, the Board requests Governments to closely monitor trends in the consumption of narcotic drugs and to adopt measures to counter their diversion and abuse, as necessary.

Established by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, INCB is the only international body with a mandate to monitor the licit manufacture and consumption of narcotic drugs around the world.

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