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1100 hours CET**

STRONGER EFFORTS ARE NEEDED TO PREVENT PEOPLE SLIPPING INTO DRUG ABUSE, SAYS INCB

VIENNA, 24 February (United Nations Information Service)—Society has to give urgent attention to preventing drug abuse, the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board said today, underlining the need for more actions and commitment.

Measures to prevent and reduce drug abuse by people who are either not using or not seriously involved with drugs—so-called primary prevention—are the focus of the first chapter of the INCB Annual Report 2009, launched today in Vienna, Austria.

The Report highlights several good reasons for society to give concerted attention to preventing drug abuse. From an individual perspective, there is no doubt that a single experience of using drugs can result in unpredictable and serious consequences such as injury or overdose. From society's perspective, drug abuse exacts a significant economic toll due to increased law enforcement, social welfare, health care, and lost productivity costs. The most recent data from the World Health Organization indicate that close to 1 per cent of ill health in the world can be attributed to drug abuse, with that proportion increasing to 2.3 per cent in developed countries.

The Report notes that rates of drug abuse tend to be higher among teenagers and young adults. While in the past a young person who had not begun using drugs by the end of their adolescent years, was unlikely to begin at all, in a number of countries more cases of young adults using drugs for the first time are occurring now. Getting married and starting a family generally have the effect of reducing substance abuse but this is happening later in some societies. Another new trend is the increase in young women using drugs—the gap with the level of drug use by young men has narrowed substantially.

Strategies for preventing drug use

Primary prevention strategies need to focus on whole populations as such strategies can reduce demand for drugs as well as identify gaps or populations that are not sufficiently served. To effectively address their needs, particular groups or vulnerable people may benefit from initiatives with greater focus or intensity.

The Report sets out strategies for primary prevention throughout people's lives, highlighting that prevention needs to begin with prospective parents, by raising their awareness of the harms caused by drug, alcohol or tobacco abuse during pregnancy.

Primary prevention for the later childhood years should be focused on family-based initiatives as most parents benefit from support, particularly in societies without established welfare systems.

Drug education is an important prevention component in early adolescence, says the Report. The most promising classroom drug education models ensure accurate, balanced information on drug risks and



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consequences, and is provided in the context of exploring social influences and teaching key life skills such as coping, decision-making, critical thinking and assertiveness.

Nightclubs, discotheques, bars and music festivals are key locations for getting messages about drug abuse across to older adolescents and young adults, as well as colleges and universities. Preventing drug use in entertainment venues needs comprehensive interventions which promote the health and safety of both staff and patrons. For example, nightclub owners can reduce drug use and invest in their employees by raising employee and supervisor awareness of drug issues.

Improving the capacity for primary prevention at national level

Evidence shows that primary prevention strategies have considerable potential to reduce demand for drugs, but to realize this potential, Governments need to bring primary prevention out from the shadows of other strategic measures. The Report describes attempts to reduce the supply of drugs as a vital part of the overall approach to tackling drug problems in society. Reducing the supply leads to higher drug prices, making drugs less accessible for people in some communities. But while supply reduction does reduce demand for drugs, so the reverse is true: that reducing the demand for drugs through primary prevention strategies amongst others, has the effect of reducing supply in communities.

The Report calls on Governments to re-establish the place of primary prevention alongside secondary prevention, which has dominated the debate in recent years. While the needs of those seriously involved with drugs must be addressed, promoting the non-use of drugs has obvious public health benefits as well.

To this end the Board calls on policymakers to establish a clear focal point for primary prevention and to develop improved cooperation between all levels of government involved such as health and education.

The Report notes that primary prevention by Governments alone will not suffice, there needs to be collaboration with non-government organizations (NGOs) and others.

With limited resources Governments should pay attention to both young people who are not using or occasionally using drugs and to those using drugs frequently, says the Report.