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INCB: URGENT ACTION IS NEEDED AGAINST THE GROWING PROBLEM OF PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE

VIENNA, 24 February (United Nations Information Service)—Abuse of prescription drugs has become a major concern, according to the report of the International Narcotics Control Board. The INCB Report says that more people are abusing such drugs than taking heroin, cocaine and MDMA (“ecstasy”) put together in some countries. High profile celebrity deaths have shed light on the dangers of prescription drug abuse in 2009. Abuse of such drugs has been spreading over the world in recent years and INCB is calling for more awareness of this “hidden” problem.

In the United States, the abuse of prescription drugs is now the second most important drug abuse issue after cannabis, with 6.2 million people abusing prescription drugs in 2008, more than the total number of people who abused cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, MDMA (“ecstasy”) and inhalants. Estimates in Germany show that 1.4 million to 1.9 million people are addicted to pharmaceutical preparations. In most main cities in Canada the majority of opioid drug users abuse prescription opioids such as hydromorphone, morphine and oxycodone.

INCB warns that prescription drug abuse particularly endangers children and youth and highlights in its Report the abuse of opioids sold as Oxycontin and Vicodin that have caused several deaths amongst young people in the United States. However, the Report also shows that abuse of prescription drugs by youth is not restricted to the United States. In 2008, methadone was implicated in almost 30 per cent of drug-related deaths among people aged 16-24 years in the United Kingdom. In several European countries (France, Italy, Lithuania and Poland) between 10 to 18 per cent of students use sedatives or tranquillizers without a prescription.

The general public tends to assume that the abuse of prescription drugs is the inappropriate use of medications to treat health problems, such as insomnia or pain. But such incidents are frequently a result of an addiction, which can be as lethal as an addiction to other drugs such as heroin or cocaine.

Pharmaceuticals containing controlled substances are used as substitutes for illicit drugs since they have similar effects and are widely available. They are diverted from pharmacies and other retailers, obtained in large quantities through doctor shopping or forged prescriptions, stolen from hospitals and doctor’s offices, prescribed or dispensed by unethical medical professionals and, more and more, obtained from illegal Internet pharmacies which sell diverted and counterfeited medicines containing controlled substances worldwide. As the INCB Report indicates, in recent years organized criminal groups responding to growing illicit demand have added diverted prescription drugs to their drug supplies.

While most countries still do not systematically collect data on prescription drug abuse, the long-standing efforts of INCB to make countries aware of the problem seems to have had some success, as the 2009 Report shows. Many countries already realize that this kind of drug abuse constitutes a major threat.

Prescription drug abuse needs to be tackled urgently in order to stop its further spread and to prevent more fatal incidents amongst celebrities and others. In its Annual Report, the INCB recommends that Governments either prohibit or closely control the sales of internationally controlled substances by Internet pharmacies and telephone call centres, in order to close down illicit supply channels. INCB also urges those countries, where prescription drug abuse represents a significant problem, to introduce specific treatment options for abusers of pharmaceutical preparations.