



Fifth WHO–UNODC Expert Consultation on New Psychoactive Substances

Addressing the challenges of non-medical use of opioids

MEETING REPORT

24–25 September 2018
WHO Headquarters
Geneva, Switzerland

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANVISA	<i>Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária</i> [Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency]
CICAD	<i>Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas</i> [Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission]
CND	Commission on Narcotic Drugs
COFEPRIS	<i>Comisión Federal para la Protección contra Riesgos Sanitarios</i> [Federal Commission for the Protection against Sanitary Risk]
ECDD	Expert Committee on Drug Dependence
EMCDDA	European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
EWA	early warning advisory
EWS	early warning system
IAHPC	International Association for Hospice & Palliative Care
IDPC	International Drug Policy Consortium
INCB	International Narcotics Control Board
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
NFLIS	National Forensic Laboratory Information System
NPS	new psychoactive substances
OAS	Organization of American States
OST	opioid substitution therapy
UNGASS	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VNGOC	Vienna Non-Governmental Organizations Committee on Drugs
WHO	World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

Background

The non-medical use of opioids, both medicines and synthetic substances, is an increasing concern for law enforcement and public health authorities. Reports show that in some high-income countries overprescribing of opioid medicines for the management of pain has led to increased rates of dependence and to a shift towards the use of more potent synthetic substances. At the same time, in low-income countries, opioid medicines for the relief of pain and for the treatment of opioid dependence are not available for patients who need them.

Non-medical use of opioid medicines has been reported in several regions of the world. In North America, fentanyl mixed with heroin or other drugs is driving the unprecedented number of overdose deaths. In Europe, heroin remains the main opioid of concern, but the non-medical use of methadone, buprenorphine and fentanyl has also been reported. In countries in west and north Africa and the Near and Middle East, the non-medical use of tramadol – an opioid medicine for the management of pain, which is not under international control – is emerging as a cause for concern.

A trend towards the increasing use of synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl analogues, has recently been observed; several of these substances being extremely potent and harmful. Although most of these substances have not been placed under international control, they cause similar harm and pose similar threats to public health to those posed by opioids that have already been scheduled. More new psychoactive substances (NPS) with opioid effects are being synthesized, and more are available than ever before, with increasing reports of associated harm and fatalities.

In the past few years, the number of NPS and opioids reviewed by the World Health Organization (WHO) Expert Committee on Drug Dependence¹ has steadily increased. At the same time, international and regional agencies have been working towards more efficient early warning and surveillance systems to ensure countries take prompt and relevant measures to prevent the use of harmful substances and to protect people's health.

The Expert Consultations on New Psychoactive Substances are held annually and are alternately hosted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Vienna, and by WHO in Geneva. These consultations convene experts from all regions of the world and from different disciplines. The aim is to share and analyse information on the most prevalent, persistent and harmful NPS, to identify innovative and successful mechanisms for improving the availability and quality of data on NPS and for developing early warning and response systems to help protect the health and well-being of people.

In March 2018, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), in its Resolution 61/8, invited UNODC “to continue to act as the coordinating entity within the United Nations system on efforts to implement

¹ For more information see: <http://www.who.int/medicines/access/controlled-substances/ecdd/en/>

activities to address the challenges posed by non-medical use of synthetic opioids”. Furthermore, the Resolution requested UNODC, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and WHO “to continue their efforts, within existing programming, to develop new and innovative approaches to better address the threats posed by the non-medical use of synthetic opioids, including treatment and prevention of their abuse”.

Addressing the challenges posed by emerging NPS and opioids is also in line with the recommendations of the 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs. The resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 April 2016, [Our joint commitment to effectively addressing and countering the world drug problem](#), recognizes that new challenges have emerged since the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action were adopted and acknowledges the importance of combining public health and supply reduction responses for successfully addressing the world drug problem.

The Fifth Expert Consultation on NPS

The Fifth WHO–UNODC Expert Consultation, held at WHO Headquarters in Geneva on 24 and 25 September 2018, focused specifically on the challenges and risks to public health posed by the non-medical use of opioids and on responses targeting supply and demand at the regional, country and global levels, in efforts to address this threat (for the full Agenda, see Annex 1).

The Consultation was attended by 50 participants drawn from United Nations (UN) and regional agencies, public health and law enforcement, governmental and academic institutions and civil society (see List of participants in Annex 2). In addition, representatives from Permanent Missions to the UN and other international organizations based in Geneva were invited to attend the opening session.

The aim of the Consultation was to identify innovative and successful strategies and practices to prevent and respond to the challenges posed by the non-medical use of opioids at the country, regional and global levels and included:

- a review of current global data and trends in the non-medical use of opioids

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