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WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence

Geneva, 12–15 September 2000

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1. Introduction

The WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence met in Geneva from 12 to 15 September 2000. The meeting was opened by Dr Y. Suzuki, Executive Director, Health Technology and Pharmaceuticals, who emphasized the significant role played by the Committee in the international drug control system. Implementation of the international drug control conventions is conducted under the auspices of the United Nations system as a whole. Within this framework, WHO undertakes medical and scientific evaluations of dependence-producing drugs and makes recommendations to the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs concerning the level of international control to be applied to them. As WHO alone has responsibility for this function, no drug can be controlled internationally without prior evaluation by WHO. Within WHO, the task of evaluating dependence-producing drugs has been entrusted to the Committee since WHO was founded in 1948. Dr Suzuki also stressed the importance of balancing the need for preventing diversion through appropriate controls against the need for ensuring easy access when assessing therapeutic substances with abuse potential.

2. Revision of guidelines

In order to implement a consistent and systematic review process, in 1986 WHO developed a formal procedure for its review of dependence-producing psychoactive substances. This procedure was revised in 1990. The Committee was informed by the Secretariat that, as recommended at the previous meeting of the Committee (*1*), the 1990 guidelines for its review of dependence-producing psychoactive substances had been revised. The new guidelines, which were adopted by the Executive Board at its 105th session in January 2000 (*2*), reflect the developments that have taken place in the international drug control system since 1990.

One of the main changes introduced by the new guidelines is the clarification provided concerning the roles of the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (*3*; hereinafter referred to as "the 1988 Convention") and of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances (*4*; hereinafter referred to as "the 1971 Convention"). In the past the Committee had noted that questions of overlapping jurisdiction between the 1971 and 1988 Conventions had hindered fully effective international regulation (*1*). The new guidelines thus provide practical guidance for avoiding unnecessary duplication of controls under the two

Conventions. One specific requirement in this regard is discussed in more detail in section 3.1 in relation to the scheduling of ephedrine. Similar guidance is given with regard to the relationship between the 1988 Convention and the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (*5*; hereinafter referred to as "the 1961 Convention"). The successful application of the new guidelines will require further strengthening of coordination between WHO and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), which is given the mandate to formulate scheduling recommendations with regard to chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances under the 1988 Convention.

Other than this, the principles of the review procedure, including the scheduling criteria, remain unchanged. Other changes in the new guidelines are organizational in nature, and include the following:

— clarification of the function of the Committee and that of the Secretariat;
— rationalization of the structure of the guidelines according to the sequence of events in the review process;
— clarification concerning the publication of documents, including the electronic publication on the Internet of scheduling recommendations.

3. Matters pending since the thirty-first meeting of the Committee

3.1 Scheduling of ephedrine under the new guidelines

The Committee conducted a critical review of ephedrine at its previous meeting in 1998 and recommended that (–)-ephedrine[1] and (±)-ephedrine[2] be placed in Schedule IV of the 1971 Convention (*1*). However, at its forty-second session in 1999 (*6*), the Commission on Narcotic Drugs decided not to vote on this recommendation, but requested that WHO, in consultation with the INCB, as appropriate, undertake for its consideration a further review of (–)-ephedrine and (±)-ephedrine.

The medical and scientific aspects of the review of ephedrine conducted by the Committee at its previous meeting were considered to be still valid. However, this critical review was carried out in conformity with the 1990 guidelines. As outlined in section 2, the new guidelines provide clear guidance for the scheduling of a psycho-