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MESSAGE

Wolfgang Götz, Director European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

On the occasion of the launch of the
Annual report 2009: the state of the drugs problem in Europe
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The past year has been an important one for drug policy, at European and global level. Almost in parallel, the European Union and the United Nations both renewed their drug policy documents, which reflect a strong international commitment to reducing drug use and the harms it can cause ⁽¹⁾. Attaining the goals set out in these documents now constitutes a major challenge and one that can only be met if the actions planned are implemented widely. Monitoring and evaluation are key elements in this process, as they allow policies to be kept on course and progress to be charted.

The *Annual report 2009: the state of the drugs problem in Europe*, presents the latest assessment of Europe's drug situation. Much of the report's strength derives from efforts within EU Member States to develop a sound drug monitoring system that now encompasses some 30 European countries. We believe that this monitoring system is not only critical for a mature and informed debate on the drugs problem, but also results in better and more effective policies.

We see today that such policies are increasingly necessary as the challenges in the drugs field grow ever more complex. A common theme running through this year's report is the need for our vision to keep pace with an ever-shifting drug phenomenon. It was around this very issue that the EMCDDA held a conference this year to celebrate 15 years of drug monitoring in Europe. Entitled: 'Identifying Europe's information needs for effective drug policy', it took stock of the existing knowledge base on drugs and set out current and future information needs. The event demonstrated that Europe offers considerable opportunities for collective learning and knowledge sharing in the drugs field and is a 'formidable laboratory' for the study and understanding of drug use and related responses.

Today's report shows that, although drug use levels remain high in Europe, we are still in a relatively stable phase as regards the more traditionally used drugs. Overall, for most forms of consumption, we are not seeing major increases and, in some areas, trends appear to be downwards. Indicators for amphetamine and ecstasy use, for example, still suggest an overall steady or declining situation. And, new data confirm a continued fall in cannabis use, particularly among young people. While it is important to acknowledge these positive developments, we must also pay heed to ongoing concerns. Cocaine and heroin continue to maintain a firm hold on Europe's drug scene, and there is little to suggest at present any improvement regarding their use in Europe.

We also note concerns that methamphetamine, a drug associated with severe public health problems around the world, may be diffusing into new territory in Europe. Although this drug is yet to make significant inroads into the stimulant drug market in Western Europe, where cocaine or amphetamine still dominate, the drug appears to be becoming more available in parts of northern Europe, where amphetamine has traditionally been the stimulant drug of choice. These developments stress the need for careful monitoring of this substance in Europe, especially given the relative ease with which it can be produced.

Among the issues underscored this year, is Europe's increasingly complex synthetic drug market, where highly innovative suppliers circumvent drug controls by offering unregulated substitutes. While this practice in itself is not new, what is new is the wide range of substances now on offer; the growing use of the Internet; the aggressive and sophisticated marketing of products (in some cases intentionally mislabelled); and the very speed at which the market reacts to controls. Faced with this 'moving target', it is essential that our information systems become more sensitive to monitoring new drugs and trends. It is also crucial that our reporting remain accurate, grounded and non-alarmist. We examine today the appearance of synthetic cannabinoids, which mark the latest stage in the development of 'designer drugs'. These can produce cannabis-like effects when consumed and appear to be targeting the cannabis market.

As the range of available substances grows and drug-taking repertoires become increasingly complex, polydrug use is also one of our key concerns. Polydrug use patterns are currently widespread in Europe, and the combined use of different substances is responsible for, or complicates, most of the problems we face. Published today, alongside the report, is a special review on this issue, which provides an overview of this behaviour in schoolchildren, young adults and problem drug users. Often a complicating factor is the concomitant use of alcohol, a substance present in almost all polydrug use repertoires. The management of polydrug use thus poses a difficult task, challenging treatment professionals who must respond to a more complex set of needs.

This brings me to the services now available to drug users in Europe, which are becoming more and more diversified and offered as part of an integrated package of care. Harm-reduction and treatment interventions, for example, are increasingly linked and offered by the same providers. And some countries now show that the integration of drug treatment into general healthcare, such as through general practitioners, can contribute to a broader provision of treatment. While the greatest advances remain in the area of opioid substitution treatment (with a treated population now in the region of 650 000), a growing number of research projects are addressing the treatment needs of stimulant and cannabis users.

Drug law enforcement also receives a high profile in this year's report, and an in-depth review released today explores what happens to those who violate drug laws. Countries are often simplistically labelled as 'liberal' or 'repressive' when it comes to drug control. But these assertions are meaningless so long as the actual outcomes of drug-law offences remain largely unknown. The review is published as a step towards filling this information gap.

Finally, we must remind ourselves that, although understanding Europe's drug problems is important, more important still is the development of effective policies and interventions to tackle them. While there remains much to be done in this domain, our report acknowledges the progress that has been, and continues to be, made in Europe to reduce the harm that drugs cause our citizens and communities. Today more than ever, understanding that such responses can be effective, is critical. As our Member States face hard choices about funding priorities, it is crucial that those in need of care and support should not be denied it. An implicit message running through our report this year is that well-conceived interventions can deliver real benefits and value.

Notes:

(¹) For details, see *Annual report*, Chapter 1: Policies and laws.

The issues described above, as well as supporting documentation, are presented in detail in two news releases (No 8/2009 and 9/2009) available in 23 languages at: www.emcdda.europa.eu/events/2009/annual-report The two Selected issue publications launched today on *Polydrug use: patterns and responses* and *Drug offences: sentencing and other outcomes* are available in English at: www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/selected-issues