



news release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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EMCDDA at Online Information 2000

WEBSITE OFFERS PATH THROUGH MINEFIELD OF DRUGS & THE LAW

Is cannabis illegal in the EU?

Within the EU, are there alternatives to prosecution for drug-dependent offenders?

In international law, is drug consumption as such illicit?

Is substitution treatment in breach of international conventions against drugs?

Is prescribing heroin for medical purposes against international law?

The **EU's Lisbon-based drugs agency (EMCDDA)** now has the answers to everyday questions like these posted on its award-winning website (<http://www.emcdda.org>). Explains **agency chief Georges Estievenart**: 'Drugs and the law are a minefield, and our new legal section aims to help users find their bearings'.

See page 2 for the answers to these questions or go directly to <http://www.emcdda.org/activities/strategy.shtml>

Estievenart adds: 'For a whole generation in Europe, drug use is a part of life. So is the use of the Internet. We must enlist the latter in facing the challenge presented by the former. Knowledge is a formidable ally in meeting this challenge. Ignorance creates a climate in which drugs and the drugs' culture flourish.'

The drugs agency's website and its new legal section will be on display at **Online Information 2000**, the biggest international conference and exhibition in the field, held in London from 5–7 December (<http://www.online-information.co.uk>). The Online exhibition will showcase an extensive range of global information products and services from over 300 exhibiting companies. The Online conference will bring together over 1,000 information professionals from some 20 countries to share insights into the latest information trends.

The **EMCDDA's** website offers fast, easily accessible and comprehensive information on all aspects of the agency's activities, products and partners. As well as the new legal section, users can find:

- detailed information on all aspects of drug use in Europe;
- downloadable publications in all **11 EU** languages plus full ordering details for all printed publications;
- links to national drug-information centres across Europe;
- free access to the **EMCDDA's** specialised drug-related databases; and
- links to a host of drug-related organisations and sites at European and international level.

Highly commended

The **EMCDDA's** website was highly commended in the recent European Information Association (EIA) Awards. 'The content is genuinely useful – not simply peripheral', was the judges' verdict.

'The site is a key part of our strategy to disseminate objective, reliable and comparable data on the European drugs phenomenon as broadly as possible', **Estievenart** says.

An important element of the site is the **EMCDDA's** *Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union 2000*, launched in Brussels on 11 October and at http://www.emcdda.org/publications/publications_annrep_00.shtml

Also recently launched is the agency's Evaluation Instrument Bank (EIB), a database of standard instruments used for evaluating drug-prevention and treatment activities in the European Union. Check it out at http://www.emcdda.org/eib/databases_eib.shtml

And since launching its new website at **Online Information 99** in December last year, the **EMCDDA** has introduced a new multilingual section that provides a comprehensive overview of the mission and work of the agency. This includes the *Annual report* in all 11 official EU languages.

Future developments

Stay tuned in 2001 for new **EMCDDA** online products, including:

- a European Legal Database on Drugs; and
- analytical briefings for policy-makers.

BRIEF ANSWERS TO THOSE LEGAL QUESTIONS...

Q. Is cannabis illegal in the EU?

A. Cannabis is a classified narcotic drug placed under control by the United Nations and all 15 **EU** Member States. It is the most widely used illicit drug in the **EU** and its legal status is one of the most controversial political issues in Europe. Measures adopted to control it at national level vary considerably.

Q. Within the EU, are there alternatives to prosecution for drug-dependent offenders?

A. Therapy instead of punishment has now become the basic principle underlying legislation, strategies and programmes throughout the **EU**. This principle is increasingly evident in the national policies of **EU** Member States and can be interpreted as an awareness of the need to provide a more positive response to those requiring help to recover from the mental and physical dependence that caused the offence. However, it must not be interpreted as, in any sense, a softening of the stance on drugs.

Q. In international law, is drug consumption as such illicit?

A. While three UN Conventions (1961, 1971, 1988) limit any use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances to medical and scientific purposes, they do not oblige signatories to criminalise single drug consumption. However, possession, including for personal use, as regulated by the UN Conventions, should be regarded as illicit in all cases where it is not explicitly authorised by law.

Q. Is substitution treatment in breach of international conventions against drugs?

A. The 1961 UN Convention recognises that 'the medical use of narcotic drugs continues to be indispensable for the relief of pain and suffering and that adequate provision must be made to ensure the availability of narcotic drugs for such purposes'. If a country considers that prescribing a controlled drug is necessary and not contrary to the general purposes of the Convention, it may do so as long as the necessary procedure is followed.

Q. Is prescribing heroin for medical purposes against international law?

A. The medical use of heroin and its controlled supply to addicts is not expressly forbidden by the 1961 Convention. It remains a controversial issue within the **EU**.

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