



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

NEW DRUGS: DIFFICULTIES OF 'HITTING A MOVING TARGET'

Market innovation and sophistication challenge drug policies, says EMCDDA

(5.11.2009, LISBON **EMBARGO 10:00 CET/Brussels time**) Europe is faced with an increasingly complex and volatile synthetic drug market, says the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)**. Suppliers are now 'highly innovative' in their production processes, product ranges and marketing and are demonstrating their ability to adapt quickly to controls. The 'growing sophistication' in marketing legal alternatives to illicit drugs (so-called 'legal highs') is also a worrying development. The difficulties of 'hitting a moving target' are described in the **Annual report 2009: the state of the drugs problem in Europe**, launched by the **EMCDDA** today in Brussels.

EU early-warning system — allows for better detection of new drugs

Europe is making headway in detecting new drugs appearing on the illicit drug market, thanks to the **EU early-warning system**, set up as a rapid-response mechanism in 1997 ⁽¹⁾. Over 90 substances have been tracked through this channel to date. In 2008, 13 new psychoactive substances were reported by **EU Member States** to the **EMCDDA** and **Europol** through the system ⁽²⁾. Of these, 11 were new synthetic drugs and two were plants (kratom and kava). For the first time, a synthetic cannabinoid, JWH-018, was among the reported drugs. This produces cannabis-like effects when smoked (see 'Spice' below). Today the **EMCDDA** releases an online 'drug profile' dedicated to synthetic cannabinoids ⁽³⁾.

'The appearance of synthetic cannabinoids marks the latest stage in the development of "designer drugs"', says the report — from the fentanyl-based drugs (1980s), to phenethylamines (late 1980s) and tryptamines (1990s), to piperazines and cathinone derivatives (2000s). Also noteworthy is that, in 2008, compared with previous years, fewer of the substances reported belonged to the main chemical groups (phenethylamines, tryptamines, piperazines). Six of the 13 were derivatives of cathinone, a psychoactive ingredient found in khat.

Monitoring the Internet — EMCDDA surveys the online drug market

The Internet is now a major marketplace for psychoactive substances, allowing retailers to offer to a broad public alternatives to controlled drugs. Highlighted in this year's report is the increasingly elaborate online marketing of these 'legal alternatives', as suppliers attempt to circumvent controls.

Monitoring the Internet is an 'increasingly important element of identifying new drug trends', states the report. In 2009, the **EMCDDA** surveyed 115 online shops in 17 European countries. The majority of the online retailers identified were based in the **UK** (37 %), **Germany** (15 %), the **Netherlands** (14 %) and **Romania** (7 %).

The wide variety of substances appearing online range from drugs used traditionally in some parts of the world, to chemicals synthesised in laboratories and untested in humans. Among the new products on sale in 2009 are 'party pills' containing legal alternatives to the newly-controlled substance BZP ⁽⁴⁾. Other innovations of the online market include the creation of distinct brands and attractive packaging, a prime example being 'Spice'.

Is 'Spice' the taste of things to come?

Products marketed under the 'Spice' brand, and often sold as incense, have been monitored through the early-warning system since early 2008. Packaging information claims that these are a blend of plant or herbal

materials (as many as 14 ingredients) ⁽⁵⁾. But, recent tests have shown some batches also to contain synthetic cannabinoids. Up to October 2009, JWH-018 and eight other synthetic cannabinoids had been identified in 'Spice' products in Europe. These ingredients do not feature in the product information and may therefore be consumed unknowingly.

The **EMCDDA** reveals that in 2009, almost half (48 %) of the 115 online retailers surveyed were offering 'Spice'. While these were based in 14 European countries, the largest number were located in the **UK** (42 %), and significant numbers in **Romania** (15 %), **Ireland** (7 %) and **Latvia** (7 %). 'Spice' was also found to be available in 'head' or 'smart' shops — commercial outlets selling 'legal highs' — in at least nine EU Member States (**Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Austria, Poland, Portugal, UK**).

Concerns over synthetic cannabinoids have led a number of countries to take legal action to ban or otherwise control 'Spice' products or related compounds (**Germany, Estonia, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Austria, Poland** and **Sweden**). At least 27 herbal smoking blends have recently been found marketed online as alternatives to 'Spice', using a wide variety of names (e.g. 'Smoke', 'Sence'). The speedy appearance of 'Spice' substitutes underlines the ability of this market to respond rapidly to changes in the legal status of psychoactive substances.

Commenting today **EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Götz** says: 'Attempts to circumvent drug controls by marketing unregulated substitutes are not new. What is new is the wide range of substances now being explored, the aggressive marketing of products that have been intentionally mislabelled, the growing use of the Internet, and the speed at which the market reacts to control measures. If Spice is a taste of things to come, Europe will need to ensure that its responses are adequate to tackle this growing challenge'.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SYNTHETIC DRUG MARKET

Recent changes in the ecstasy market

According to today's report, most ecstasy tablets analysed until 2007 typically contained MDMA or another ecstasy-like substance (e.g. MDA, MDEA). However, more recent, preliminary data suggest that this may be changing in some EU countries. For example, in around half of the 'ecstasy' tablets seized or sold in **Denmark** and the **Netherlands**, no MDMA was found, but instead tablets contained mCPP ⁽⁶⁾.

Changes in the ecstasy market may be the result of the increasingly successful efforts to prevent the diversion of precursors, the controlled chemicals used to manufacture illicit drugs (see box, Chapter 4). The shortage of PMK, a key precursor used to make MDMA, could be one explanation for the recent changes in the make-up of ecstasy. It cannot yet be said if this development is temporary or marks a more significant shift in the market. The **EMCDDA** and **Europol** will be bringing out a joint analysis of the ecstasy market in 2010.

Europe remains the main location for ecstasy production, which is concentrated in the **Netherlands** and **Belgium**, and to a lesser extent **Germany**, the **UK** and **Poland**. Some 13 million ecstasy tablets were intercepted in Europe in 2007. It is estimated that 10 million European adults (15–64 years) have tried ecstasy in their lifetime and around 2.5 million have used it in the past year. Most of the users are young adults (15–34 years) — around 7.5 million of them have ever tried ecstasy and some 2 million have used it in the last year. Trends in ecstasy use are generally stable in Europe (see Figure GPS-21, parts i and ii).

Methamphetamine edges into new territory

Methamphetamine is yet to make significant inroads into the stimulant drug market in western Europe, where cocaine or amphetamine still dominate. However, there are some signs that methamphetamine is starting to edge into new territory.

Historically, methamphetamine use in Europe has been concentrated in the **Czech Republic**. Today's report informs, however, that the drug appears to be becoming more available in parts of northern Europe, such as **Norway** and **Sweden**, where amphetamine has traditionally been the stimulant drug of choice. Market factors

and precursor chemicals again seem important here, with production sites appearing to be located in **Lithuania**, whose geographical position may facilitate the importation of the methamphetamine precursor BMK from outside the EU.

In 2007, almost 4 500 seizures of methamphetamine, amounting to approximately 340 kg were reported in Europe. **Norway** accounted for by far the highest number of seizures (1 284) and the largest amount of methamphetamine recovered (167 kg). The second largest amount of methamphetamine seized in Europe (51 kg) was in **Sweden** (see Tables SZR 17 and SZR 18).

Methamphetamine production in Europe has traditionally taken place in small-scale kitchen laboratories in the **Czech Republic**, where small quantities are produced usually for personal or local consumption (around 390 of these laboratories were detected in 2007). However **Europol** now reports that a small number of larger sites have been detected and dismantled in other parts of Europe, such as **Germany** and the **Netherlands** ⁽⁷⁾.

Today's report warns that 'given the relative ease with which methamphetamine can be produced and the considerable negative impact that this drug can have on public health, there is no room for complacency'. A case in point is **Slovakia**, a country where methamphetamine problems have grown significantly in recent years. Around a quarter (26 %) of clients entering treatment in **Slovakia** now report methamphetamine as their primary drug.

Commenting on today's findings, **Director Wolfgang Götz** concludes: 'The speed at which the drug market is moving and evolving, illustrates how globalisation and innovation present countries with a growing challenge. Current approaches to monitoring and responding to the use of new psychoactive substances will also need to evolve if they are to keep pace with this shifting phenomenon'.

Notes

Data presented in the *Annual report 2009* relate to 2007 or the last year available.

Figures and tables cited in this news release may be found in the 2009 Statistical bulletin

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/stats09>

Information on, and links to, all *Annual report* products, news releases, services and events are available at:

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/events/2009/annual-report>

This news release is based largely on the Commentary and Chapter 8 of the report.

⁽¹⁾ For more, see <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drug-situation/new-drugs> and <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index40105EN.html>

⁽²⁾ For the full list of substances, see Annex 2 to the 2008 EMCDDA–Europol annual report on the implementation of Council Decision 2005/387/JHA <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index33227EN.html>

⁽³⁾ Drug profile on synthetic cannabinoids — <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/drug-profiles>

⁽⁴⁾ On 3 March 2008, the Council of the EU adopted a decision defining 1-benzylpiperazine (BZP) as a new psychoactive substance to be subjected to control measures and criminal provisions in the EU Member States. See <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index16783EN.html>

⁽⁵⁾ See EMCDDA Spice report at: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/thematic-papers>

⁽⁶⁾ mCPP has been monitored through the early-warning system since 2004.

⁽⁷⁾ See p. 20, EMCDDA–Europol report 'Methamphetamine: a European Union perspective in the global context', <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index82068EN.html>

See also <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/drug-profiles/methamphetamine>