



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

EMCDDA 15 YEARS: CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

Experts and policymakers underline need for rapid and innovative responses to Europe's changing drugs problem

(8.5.2009, LISBON **EMBARGO 13.15 GMT**) Experts and policymakers gathering this week in Lisbon for an international conference, underlined the need for rapid and innovative responses to Europe's changing drugs problem. Organised by the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)**, and commemorating 15 years of monitoring Europe's drug phenomenon, the event was dedicated to '**Identifying Europe's information needs for effective drug policy**'.

Some 300 policymakers, researchers and practitioners from Europe, North America and Australia, considered the major challenges arising from today's drug situation, and the type of information required to respond to it in future. They also took stock of achievements to date, including the creation of an extensive regional monitoring system (Reitox network) — which now provides comparable drugs information from some 30 countries — and a European early-warning system, which detects new and potentially threatening drugs entering the illicit market ⁽¹⁾.

Speaking at the closing session today, **EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Götz** said: 'This conference has demonstrated that Europe is a formidable laboratory of ideas and experiences, and an extraordinary reservoir of people and talents. By bringing these together, the meeting has helped us take stock of the progress made, which is considerable, but also identify the tasks that lie ahead of us. As such, it has been an important milestone in monitoring and responding to drugs in Europe.'

Since the agency began reporting in the early 1990s, the nature of Europe's drugs problem has evolved. Although drug use in Europe is now entering a more stable phase, new challenges have appeared in recent years. These include growing cocaine and polydrug use, new psychoactive substances and the misuse of prescription medicines. Strong mechanisms are now in place in Europe to carry out regular and sustained drug monitoring of developments as well as to ensure rapid responses to new substances.

'A clear message from this conference', **Götz** added, 'is that we have a growing understanding of what works in the drugs field. We now need to make the most of this knowledge to ensure that comprehensive and effective services become available for those with drug problems across the EU'.

The conference was inaugurated by **Prime Minister of Portugal, José Sócrates** who underlined the fact that, being seated in Portugal, the **EMCDDA** had contributed a great deal to the development and maturity of the national drug policy, which he considered both 'just and successful'.

Guest of honour at the closing session was **President of the Portuguese Republic, Aníbal Cavaco Silva** who declared: 'Drug addiction is a sickness. As such, we have to prevent and treat it. Drug dependence, as any other illness, is not a purely individual matter. It is the result of an unhappy union of predisposition and vulnerability, associated with availability and opportunity. It is a product of people, of places and of moments. For this reason, tackling drugs is a clear example of the need to join forces to act simultaneously on various fronts'.

HIGHLIGHTS

'Detecting new drugs coming our way' — concerns over synthetic cannabinoids

Reflecting on 'New drugs coming our way — what are they and how to detect them?', experts at the conference discussed the implications of the over 90 new substances reported to the **EMCDDA** and **Europol** since 1997 through the European early-warning system. (The most recent drug brought under control across the EU Member States, following monitoring through the system, was the stimulant drug BZP, in March 2008). Attention was given at the conference to 'Spice', observed through the system since early 2008 (speaker: L. King). Although a blend of plant or herbal materials, often marketed as air freshener, some EU countries have expressed concerns over 'Spice' products. This follows reports by some users that, when smoked, they had similar effects to those produced by cannabis. Participants at the conference heard how recent tests had shown some samples to contain synthetic cannabinoids (e.g. JWH-018) which mimic the effects of Δ^9 -THC, the primary active ingredient in cannabis. The event reviewed the level of preparedness in Europe to new developments of this kind and the potential implications for public health.

Mapping Europe's changing cannabis market: new figures released at conference

New estimates released at the conference show that some **1 750 tonnes** of cannabis are consumed in the European Union and Norway every year, according to an **EMCDDA**-funded study, undertaken by its French partner, the **Observatoire français des drogues et des toxicomanies**. The study, which maps Europe's changing cannabis market, reveals that this total volume of cannabis consumed could equate to a retail value of **€9.6 billion** (€ 92 billion for alcohol, €143 billion for tobacco). To be released later this year, the study reports on changes in cannabis supply and demand, including increased domestic production in the EU and the market shares and potencies of different cannabis products, particularly 'home-grown' varieties. Also discussed at the conference was the reported decline of cannabis production in Morocco, long-time supplier of the drug to Europe. By uncovering market changes, the study will contribute to more efficient responses to cannabis use and trafficking in Europe. New analysis of data on cannabis use in Europe suggests that around 20% of the drug is being seized by law-enforcement officials (speaker: J-M.Costes, www.ofdt.fr).

Conference reviews latest trends in illicit drug use among European school students

Use of illicit drugs among 15–16-year-old school students, appears to have stabilised or slightly fallen, according to the latest European study of this group published by **ESPAD**. The **2007 ESPAD report: substance use among students in 35 European countries** also reveals a decrease in last-month rates of cigarette smoking among school students. However, it sounds the alarm over clear rises in the group's 'heavy episodic drinking', and the narrowing gender gap in this behaviour.

This is the fourth data-collection wave conducted by the **ESPAD** project, with multi-national surveys providing a window on substance use in 1995, 1999, 2003 and 2007. The data show that, overall, the increase in illicit drug use (mainly cannabis) between 1995 and 2003, had come to a halt, if not a decrease, in 2007. Around 19% of students surveyed had tried cannabis in their lifetime and 7% had tried it in the last month (speaker: B. Hibbell). The **ESPAD** report is complemented by a multilingual summary produced with the **EMCDDA** ⁽²⁾.

'Messages that click': new European study on Internet-based drug treatment

Information exchange through the Internet benefits both sides of the illicit drug market. While the Web greatly enhances the marketing opportunities of drug producers, it is also becoming a key medium for communicating information in the field of public health. In a new European study released at the conference today, the **EMCDDA** provides a state-of-the art review of **Internet-based drug treatment interventions**. This innovative approach has already shown some promising results. Experts debated its potential to reach young people early in their drug-using careers — who may feel ill-at-ease at traditional drug treatment centres — as well as to help those with drug problems in rural areas. Also noted is the ease with which these treatment programmes can be translated and exchanged between countries (speaker P. Tossman) ⁽³⁾.

Monitoring drugs in a technological age

New scientific findings that increase our understanding of the mechanisms behind drug use and addiction — and which are leading to new approaches in the treatment of drug problems — were presented by the conference participants. Among others, they explored technological developments in biomedicine, genetic and brain research and new methods to detect drug use by analysing wastewater. This discussion precedes a major new **EMCDDA** study to be released later this month on ***Addiction neurobiology: ethical and social implications***. This explores the potential of this emerging science to impact on the way we respond to drug addiction.

Independent, science-based information, a key resource

The creation of the **EMCDDA** in 1993 symbolised a major political decision to build drug-related policies on scientific and technical findings. Independent, science-based information is now seen as a key resource to help Europe understand the nature of its drug problems.

On this topic, **Francisco Fonseca Morillo**, Director at the Directorate-General for Justice, Freedom and Security, at the European Commission said: 'We are convinced that evidence-based drug policies are the way forward, not only for Europe but also for the rest of the world'.

Addressing the conference, **Marcel Reimen, Chairman and long-serving member of the EMCDDA Management Board**, paid tribute to the agency, saying: 'You have succeeded in supporting policymaking on drugs. While political convergence within the great EU family is still progressing, there is now a clear convergence on the utility of reliable and comparable drug data, thanks to the work of the EMCDDA'.

Notes:

(¹) For more on the Reitox network, see www.emcdda.europa.eu/about/partners/reitox-network. For more on monitoring new drugs and the European early-warning system, see www.emcdda.europa.eu/drug-situation/new-drugs

(²) The ESPAD report and summary are available at: www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index77163EN.html

(³) See Insights No 10 at www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/insights