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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 2008: the state of the drugs problem in Europe*  
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A cool-headed analysis of what we know about today's drug situation is an essential condition for an informed, productive and reasoned debate on this complex issue. Such an analysis ensures that opinions are enlightened by facts, and that those making difficult policy choices have a clear understanding of the options available and the benefits they may bring. This is the rationale behind our *Annual report 2008: the state of the drugs problem in Europe*, which we are proud to present today in Brussels.

The past year has been an unprecedented one for reflection, at European and global level, on how drug policies have performed to date and what directions should be pursued in future. The EMCDDA has contributed actively at both these levels. In particular, it has provided technical support to the European Commission in the evaluation of the current EU drugs action plan (2005–08); as well as in the ongoing progress review regarding goals set at the 1998 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs <sup>(1)</sup>.

It is gratifying to note that, by international standards, Europe now stands out as one of the parts of the world where drug monitoring capacities are most developed. Nevertheless, we remain fully committed to further improving the quality and relevance of the available data, in order to better inform policymaking and practice across the EU.

Today's report shows that, although drug use levels remain historically high, we appear to be entering a more stable phase. 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, suggest an overall steady or declining situation. And, in the most recent data, there are stronger signals that cannabis use is stabilising or decreasing among young people in some countries.

Treatment availability, although still insufficient, continues to grow in Europe; to such an extent that, in some countries, the majority of heroin users — once considered a hidden population — are now in contact with services of one sort or another. And, while only a few years ago, HIV infection among drug injectors was a central concern in the drug policy debate, rates of new infection attributed to drug use have fallen and continue to do so.

We are also witnessing greater cohesion at European level in the way in which EU Member States are addressing the issue. Currently 26 EU Member States, as well as Croatia, Turkey and Norway, have adopted a national drug policy document (compared to 10 countries in 1995), with these increasingly structured along similar lines to the EU drugs action plan. The last year has also been one of unparalleled activity in policymaking at national level, with around half (13) of the EU Member States in various stages of reviewing and redrafting their drug policy documents.

While it is important to acknowledge these positive developments, we must also remember that the dynamic nature of the drug problem presents us with ongoing concerns and future challenges. Highlighted today are: warning signs over heroin; continuing increases in cocaine

use; high prevalence of the hepatitis C virus (HCV) among injectors; high rates of drug-related deaths; and more reports of diversion and illicit production of synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl. In addition, the report underlines an average 36 % rise in reported drug law offences in the EU Member States in the five years from 2001 to 2006. And special attention is given to the potential risk of drug use problems among vulnerable young people in a review published today alongside the *Annual report* <sup>(2)</sup>.

These concerns bring me to the cost of the drugs problem for Europe — an underlying theme of the current drug policy debate and an issue addressed in various parts of today's report <sup>(3)</sup>. Over the past 12 months, the EMCDDA has been working to identify and test common tools that will facilitate data collection on drug-related public expenditure across the EU. While this work is still in its infancy, our first estimates suggest that state expenditure on the drugs problem could be costing the average EU citizen around EUR 60 per year.

Even more difficult to quantify is the harm caused by drug use: the tragic loss of life; the effects of drug-related crime; the negative impact on communities where drugs are produced or sold; and the extent to which drug trafficking undermines the social development and political stability of producer and transit countries. We only have to consider the worrying developments resulting from the transiting of cocaine through West Africa to be reminded of the collateral damage that the drug problem can cause.

Finally today, we look at how research into the drugs problem is carried out in all European countries, where it provides the information essential to describing and understanding the impact of illicit drugs. A recent EMCDDA report on this issue <sup>(4)</sup> provides an overview of the organisation of drug-related research in Europe. An upcoming study launched by the European Commission will include recommendations to address knowledge gaps and improve cooperation in the research field at European level.

The past year is likely to be viewed as an important juncture in the history of international drug control policy. As Europe prepares to embark on a new EU drugs action plan (2009–12), it does so in the knowledge that, more than at any time in the past, there is a stronger agreement on the direction to follow and a clearer understanding of the challenges ahead.

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**Notes:**

<sup>(1)</sup> The 10-year progress review was launched at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in March 2008.

<sup>(2)</sup> See Selected issue publication: *Drugs and vulnerable groups of young people*, 6.11.2008. <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/selected-issues>

<sup>(3)</sup> See also Selected issue publication: *Towards a better understanding of drug-related public expenditure in Europe*, July 2008.

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/selected-issues>

<sup>(4)</sup> See also Selected issue publication: *National drug related-research in Europe*, October 2008. <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/selected-issues>

Information on all *Annual report* products, news releases, services and events will be available at 10H00 CET on 6.11.2008 at: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/events/2008/annual-report>