



**WHO intervention at the plenary session of 64<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.**

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***Delivered by Dévora Kestel, Director, Department of Mental Health and Substance Use***

Madame/Mister Chair,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

The World Health Organization, in line with its strategic objectives, prioritizes protection of populations from harm due to drug use, advancing universal health coverage and legitimate access to controlled medicines, and protection of populations from health emergencies.

As mandated by the international drug control conventions, the Expert Committee on Drug Dependence continues to be vigilant in the monitoring of new psychoactive drugs as they enter the market and make recommendations about their level of international control.

Ensuring equitable access to and appropriate use of safe and effective medicines under international control continues to be a challenging task for many health systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This has been even more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic as severe shortages of essential controlled medicines have been reported including for medicines used in intensive care units for the treatment of patients with severe COVID-19.

People with drug use disorders are at increased risk of COVID-19 and its complications. It is of paramount importance to ensure for them access to effective and ethical prevention, treatment and care, including vaccination against COVID-19. It is essential to provide uninterrupted critical services, including pharmacological treatment of opioid

dependence, prevention of drug overdoses, harm reduction services and other types of support for people with health conditions associated with drug use such as HIV, TB and hepatitis.

Results of a WHO rapid assessment of the impact of the pandemic on health services indicate that drug overdose prevention programs were disrupted in 53% of countries, critical harm reduction services in 63%, and opioid agonist maintenance treatment in 45% of countries involved in the assessment.

Unprecedented challenges of the pandemic has and continue to prompt the development of innovative approaches to service provision for people with drug use disorders. Some of these have actually potential for improved service access such as the provision of take home opioid agonist maintenance medicines. These approaches may help advance Universal Health Coverage when the pandemic is over.

Global collaborative and coordinated efforts are needed more than ever to assess the impact of COVID-19 on drug use and service provision, and strengthen preparedness of prevention and treatment systems for health emergencies.

The World Health Organization will continue to work on the public health dimensions of the world drug problem in collaboration with UNODC, INCB and other partners. And this year we celebrate 10 years of WHO-UNODC program on drug dependence treatment and care.

We must work together to advance a public health approach in drug policies and accelerate implementation of commitments made by Member States and the international community in line with the SDG 2030 agenda and recommendations of UNGASS 2016 on the world drug problem.