

**WHO intervention at the plenary session of 66th session of the
Commission on Narcotic Drugs.**

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Delivered by Dr Vladimir Poznyak

Mister Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

In implementing its mandate and commitments, the World Health Organization continues to work on its priority drug-related areas, including protecting people from harms due to drug use, improving access to controlled medicines, as well as, advancing evidence-based, ethical prevention and management of drug use and drug use disorders.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and its enormous impact on the physical and mental health of people and the disruption of health services around the world, we face emerging challenges to our public health responses to drug use and drug use disorders. The recent dramatic humanitarian emergencies, the growing burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, an opioid overdose crisis which is particularly acute in several countries - all these factors present enormous challenges for already stretched health systems around the world. At the same time, many other countries struggle to access opioids and other controlled medicines that WHO considers essential for effective health care in the context of Universal Health Coverage.

The Special Session of the UN General Assembly on the world drug problem held in 2016 provided a broad roadmap for Member States and other stakeholders on implementing effective health care strategies to reduce the overall burden of disease, injuries and suffering associated

with drug use. The ‘United Nations system common position’ supporting the implementation of the international drug control policy highlighted the importance of effective UN interagency collaboration. In recent years, WHO significantly increased its collaboration with UNODC and other UN entities on the implementation of international commitments highlighted in the UNGASS 2016 outcome document.

Ensuring safe, equitable access to medicines under international control continues to be a difficult task for most countries, yet it is a particularly important intervention during humanitarian emergencies when the barriers to accessing medicines are even greater. The COVID-19 pandemic, wars, and natural disasters highlight the critical importance of members states having secured access to essential controlled medicines for effective health responses during these emergencies.

People who use drugs and who are living with drug use disorders should have non-discriminatory access to effective and ethical prevention, treatment and harm reduction services. Opioid agonist maintenance treatment is indispensable for effective treatment of opioid dependence, likewise, wide availability of Naloxone for effective prevention of opioid overdose deaths, has been a hallmark of the public health response to the burgeoning opioid overdose epidemic in many countries. The provision of sterile injecting equipment for people who inject drug is an essential harm reduction intervention with public health impact on HIV and viral hepatitis epidemics. Stigma, discrimination, criminalisation and violations of human rights – are all key barriers to the access of essential health services for people who use drugs and with drug use disorders.

Global collaborative and coordinated efforts are needed more than ever to monitor the health effects of psychoactive drug use in populations, particularly with rapid changes in regulations for cannabis in some jurisdictions. Whatever regulatory changes are considered by national governments, the health of populations should take a precedence over commercial interests, and all the necessary measures should be put in place to protect the health of people, particularly those most vulnerable.

New evidence generated for the prevention and management of health conditions due to drug use, as well as emerging treatment options, require regular updates of WHO normative guidance, including the upcoming WHO guidance to national policymakers to ensure safe and balanced access to controlled medicines.

WHO, through its annually convened Expert Committee on Drug Dependence has provided recommendations to countries on the appropriate level of international control for psychoactive substances to protect against health-related harms while ensuring legitimate access to psychoactive medicines and medicinal preparations for clinical care and research.

Novel synthetic drugs such as synthetic opioids and stimulants, have multiplied during recent years which present additional challenges for health of people if not properly addressed through effective prevention, treatment and harm reduction interventions.

The World Health Organization will continue its work to advance a public health approach in drug policies to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the most vulnerable.