

6th Intersessional Meeting
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Vienna, 16-18 October 2019

Thematic Session 3: Synthetic opioids and the non-medical use of prescription drugs pose increasing risks to public health and safety, as well as scientific, legal and regulatory challenges, including with regard to the scheduling of substances

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Government of Estonia.

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

In the last decade Estonia has been among European countries with the biggest problem of illicit opioid use and the highest number of overdose related deaths. Estonia is one of the few countries in the world where the illegal drug market is dominated by fentanyl – a synthetic opioid much stronger than heroin. At the beginning of the 2000s Estonia was hit by several waves of deaths related to fentanyl overdoses. It was initially considered that the situation was temporary and that fentanyl and overdose deaths would disappear once the supply of heroin was restored. However, after a few years it was clear that fentanyl was here to stay and we have learned in the most painful way that the lack of timely and sufficient action can lead to avoidable loss of human lives.

Fentanyls are 100 to 1000 times more potent compared to heroin. Even fractional errors in dosing can have fatal consequences. When mixed or confused with other less potent substances may result in increased risks of accidental exposure and overdose.

Opioid overdoses are now more frequent than traffic accidents as a cause of death. Both in Europe and North America the recent emergence of highly potent new synthetic opioids, mostly fentanyl derivatives, represents a major public health threat. Fentanyls are being sold on online and are now increasingly also found on the illicit market. There is a particular concern when they are found mixed with heroin, other illicit drugs and counterfeit medicines. Fentanyls pose serious health risks to those who use them but also to those who are involved in their manufacture. They are easy to conceal, transport and a profitable commodity for organized crime groups and therefore likely to represent a growing challenge in the future for drug control policies. Users of fentanyls are at huge risk – through lack of tolerance, lack of access to naloxone, co consumption with other central nervous system depressants or consumption of larger doses. Skin contact, inhalation or ingestion of fentanyls poses a risk which puts also families & friends, law enforcement, postal workers, prison staff, medical and forensic staff all potentially at risk.

There are several future actions to consider:

First of all, more insight is needed on health consequences caused by fentanyls.

More research is needed on effectiveness of the pharmacologically assisted treatment in case of fentanyl addiction. While there is no evidence to imply that interventions addressing the opioid use are not effective in case of fentanyl use, treatment schemes might need to be reviewed and new interventions might be needed considering higher risk behaviour of fentanyl users as compared to heroin users.

Countries not yet affected by the problem should stay alert as there are clear signs that new synthetic opioids are spreading. National warning systems should be further developed to provide rapid information to different stakeholders but also drug users to better inform their behaviours.

International cooperation is welcomed to promote use of naloxone and improve its availability (for example involving non-medical professionals in the distribution of naloxone).

As there are difficulties with identification of fentanyls, national forensic systems should become more sophisticated to be able to detect new substances faster and more precisely.

Law enforcement and customs officers, laboratory experts and other first responders who might be in contact with fentanyls should be trained to prevent accidental exposure and if necessary, equipped with naloxone.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize a need for a holistic approach that includes monitoring, control, early detection, investigation, and most importantly prevention, harm reduction and treatment.

Thank You!