

SSRI's

(promotion of education and information on the appropriate use of psychoactive drugs)

The 33rd meeting of the Expert Committee discussed SSRI's. Its report says the following on this issue:

' The Committee noted the striking number of reports on paroxetine and "withdrawal syndrome" (see list of SSRIs in the Table in the Annex). The representative of Consumers International reported that a number of patients had experienced difficulty in withdrawing from SSRIs in general. It was agreed that withdrawal was indeed a problem in some patients, but there was a difference of opinion on the degree of dependence that was involved, given the possibility that the need for treatment of resistant or relapsing disease could make these drugs indispensable for patient care. The Committee expressed concern about the possibility of inappropriate prescribing resulting in the risk of problems of withdrawal outweighing the benefits of treatment with SSRIs. The Committee agreed that there was a possible therapeutic problem with these drugs, but that there was no evidence of diversion of the drug for abuse because SSRIs are so widely available. The Committee recommended that SSRI's be placed on the agenda of the next Committee for consideration, not in the context of control, but to promote education and information on the appropriate use of psychoactive drugs.'

The issue is placed on the agenda of the present Expert Committee meeting in order to discuss how to proceed.

With regard to this, the Secretariat remarks that the first question is, whether the Expert Committee really wants to address the issue to "promote education and information on the appropriate use of psychoactive drugs", and if so, whether, whether SSRI's would be the first priority to address.

The Committee should be informed that The World Health Assembly and ECOSOC requested the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to examine the feasibility of a possible assistance mechanism that would facilitate the adequate treatment of pain using opioid analgesics (resolutions ECOSOC 2005/25 and WHA58.22).

With regard to the present situation, the Secretariat concluded that medical science provides enough evidence on the capability to deal effectively with the relief of most pain. Currently, however, over 80% of the world's population will have insufficient analgesia, or no analgesia at all, if they are suffering from such pain. For example, millions of cancer and HIV/AIDS patients suffer from moderate to severe pain due to barriers to access of opioid analgesics. It is also proven that opioid agonist

pharmacotherapy is one of the most effective treatment options for opioid dependence and a critical component of community-based approaches for the efficient prevention of HIV infection among injecting drug users. However, in over 150 countries, patients with opioid dependence, do not have access to such therapy. In addition, over half a million women die every year giving birth, but efedrine and ergometrine, two essential medicines needed in emergency obstetric care, are often difficult to obtain, even though reducing maternal death is a part of the Millennium Development Goals.

Given this situation, at least it is not opportune to start with SSRI's, but instead, access to opioids should have highest priority.

In view of the situation as described above, the Secretariat is working on a plan to improve access to controlled medicines. Depending on the available funds the activities can become quite a lot. For many of these activities it is necessary to consult specialists. This will be the case for establishing current good practices, the development of e-Tools and their content, for establishing the details of the methodology of further analysis, for writing model legislation and for the evaluation of international requirements. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list, and other issues can be thought of. A formal and regularly accessible forum would enhance the consultation of such experts, and the Expert Committee on Drug Dependence might be the right panel.

For this reason the Expert Committee might discuss whether it is the right panel to provide such expertise to the Secretariat.