

The School of INN (International Nonproprietary Names)

In 1950 WHO established the INN Programme to provide a common language for people all over the world to work together for the safe and effective use of medicines.

The main objective of the programme is to define a single, unique, globally accepted name for each pharmaceutical substance.

The INN Programme is now launching a virtual school to mainstream INN and contribute to better treatment outcomes and patient safety globally.



What is an INN?

International Nonproprietary Names (INN) are global names for medicines.

They provide one reference generic name for each individual medicine that comes to market.

Since 1953, the World Health Organization has named over 10 000 medicines.



Why are they important?

A medicine can be identified in different ways:

- by its brand names (i.e. Algifor®, Advil®, etc.),
- by its chemical name (i.e. 2-(4-isobutylphenyl) propanoic acid), and
- by its international nonproprietary name (i.e. ibuprofen).

With tens of thousands of medicines on the market, confusion between medicine names can have serious consequences for patient safety.

The original aim of the INN system was to increase patient safety, making sure that “a prescription filled abroad is what doctor ordered back home”. However, the use of INN has added benefits for individual patients and for public health.

Because INN provide a key to understanding medicine names and classes, they can assist clinicians in prescribing the most appropriate medicine for their patients and overall, provide appropriate communication among health care professionals.



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Why is a School of INN needed?

Any student of pharmacology and therapeutics will tell you that remembering names of pharmaceutical substances and their mechanisms of action is one of the most challenging tasks in their courses. Students tend to learn medicine names by rote.

The challenge does not end there. Throughout their career, health care professionals have to keep up with a continuous stream of names of new active pharmaceutical substances introduced into clinical practice, their mechanisms of action and how they work differently from existing medicines.

Meetings conducted over the years and a recent survey involving more than 1 000 respondents revealed an emerging need for a more prominent source of information on the INN nomenclature system. The survey showed that although INN are increasingly used in teaching, in practice many prescribers still prefer using brand names.

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