The World Health Organization: EXPANDING PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACHES TO THE WORLD DRUG PROBLEM

For the World Health Organization, from a public health perspective, addressing the world drug problem is a balancing act: between preventing illicit use of drugs and associated health problems, and ensuring access to drugs for medical conditions and pain relief.

THE PROBLEM

Illicit Use Of Drugs

Around the world, an estimated 246 million people used illicit drugs in 2013 (UNODC, 2015). Globally, cannabis is the most widely used, followed by opioids, amphetamine-type stimulants and cocaine. Furthermore, in the last 10 years there has been an unprecedented increase in the number and non-medical use of synthetic psychoactive substances, such as synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones.

Each year, the main decision-making body on drug control in the UN system, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, meets to discuss drug policy issues and decide which substances should be placed under international control. Countries are required to apply special measures to substances under international control, to prevent their non-medical use and diversion during import, storage and distribution. WHO provides expert advice to the Commission on which drugs should be controlled, after assessing their harm to health and dependence-producing properties. Since its first meeting in 1949, the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence has reviewed more than 400 substances.

ACCESS FOR MEDICAL CONDITIONS AND PAIN RELIEF

It is estimated that 83% of the world’s population lives in countries with low or non-existent access to legally-available medicines needed for medical conditions such as HIV and cancer, and pain relief during labour, after surgery and following injuries caused by accidents and violence. Only 15% of people needing palliative care receive the treatment they need. Equally, despite strong evidence of efficacy, treatment of opioid dependence with opioid maintenance therapy is frequently unavailable.

For more information on WHO’s work
- WHO’s role, mandate and activities to counter the world drug problem  http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/drug_role_mandate/en/
WHO’S ROLE

Within the UN system, WHO has a leading role in helping countries prevent and treat medical problems resulting from the use of illicit drugs and ensuring that legally-available medicines reach all who need them.

In working towards these goals, WHO:

- Provides evidence-based guidance on the prevention and treatment of substance use disorders and related health consequences including: blood-borne infections such as HIV, hepatitis B and C; tuberculosis; drug overdose; drug-induced mental disorders and injuries;

- Helps countries strengthen their public health response to drug problems, including the provision of prevention, treatment and harm reduction services and interventions;

- Assesses the dependence-producing properties and potential harm of psychoactive substances for possible control under international drug conventions; and

- Collects, collates, analyses and disseminates information on the prevalence of illicit drug use and its health consequences in populations, as well as health sector responses.

WHO IS WORKING TO ADDRESS THE WORLD DRUG PROBLEM IN FIVE AREAS:

- Prevention of drug use and reduction of vulnerability and risks
- Treatment and care of people with drug use disorders
- Prevention and management of the harms associated with drug use (harm reduction)
- Access to controlled medicines
- Monitoring and evaluation

Morphine, used to manage pain, and diazepam and phenobarbital, used for management of mental disorders and other health conditions, are among the essential medicines controlled under the international drug control conventions. This means they are subject to restrictions to prevent their diversion during import, storage, distribution and use. Patients suffer when these controls obstruct their use for medical purposes. WHO works with countries to review and strengthen legislative, regulatory and health-care systems to remove impediments to access to essential controlled medicines.

Collaboration Within The UN

WHO works with its partners in the international system to strengthen the public health approach to addressing the world drug problem. Collaboration between the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and WHO is strong, with joint activities through the UNODC-WHO Programme on Drug Dependence Treatment and Care ongoing in more than 15 countries, and collaboration on drug-related HIV infections and drug epidemiology with UNODC and UNAIDS. WHO also works with the UNODC and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) to improve access to controlled medicines. Furthermore, the three organizations collaborate on surveillance of new psychoactive substances.

The Role Of Health Services

People with drug disorders deserve the same level of care as patients with any other health condition. Health services need to be able to identify drug use and drug use disorders at an early stage and provide prevention, treatment and harm reduction interventions. For people who are not yet dependent on drugs, efforts should focus on preventing dependence and reducing the harms associated with drug use. For people suffering from drug dependence, health systems have to provide access to comprehensive treatment, including psychosocial support, pharmacotherapy (including opioid substitution therapy for people dependent on opioids) and the prevention and management of associated health problems such as HIV, tuberculosis, viral hepatitis, mental health disorders and drug overdose.

The Role Of Governments

National governments need to provide a legislative framework, policy guidance, health system infrastructure and financial resources to enable health services to prevent and treat drug use disorders. Policies must also address the discrimination that can prevent people with drug use disorders from accessing the help they need.

For more information on WHO’s work
- Controlled medicines http://www.who.int/medicines/access/controlled-substances/en/
- Substance abuse http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/en/