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INTER-AMERICAN DRUG ABUSE
CONTROL COMMISSION

CICAD

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Secretariat for Multidimensional Security

Information Bulletin on New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

1. Purpose

The purpose of this information bulletin is to assist member states in addressing the emergence of new psychoactive substances in their illegal drug market. The document suggests a definition for implicated substances and a number of actions member states could consider in tackling this extremely dynamic drug phenomenon.

2. Definition

Emerging substances or plants, used in pure or preparation form that represent a risk to health and/or safety, and that are not controlled under the 1961 or 1971 conventions. “Emerging” refers to a new or renewed presence on the illegal drug market, not necessarily newly discovered.

For ease of interpretation, the UNODC has grouped NPS into six categories:

- synthetic cannabinoids
- synthetic cathinones
- ketamine
- phenylethylamines
- piperazines
- plants, e.g., khat, salvia

To be clear, some of these categories contain substances that are already under international control. The focus of this information bulletin however, is the substances of are not yet under international control.

3. Sources of information

There are multiple sources of information about emerging NPS, both official and unofficial:

a. Official - Internal

- referral of detained or seized shipments from border and customs authorities/agencies
- domestic law enforcement agency seizures/ case reports
- reports of tampered shipments from legitimate importers
- forensic drug-testing laboratories
- health effect information, e.g., drug use network reports, adverse event reports, hospital emergency room reports, poison control center reports, etc.

b. Official - External

- reports from foreign countries
- reports from international organizations
- scientific literature

c. Unofficial

- news media reports
- social media reports
- web-based information, e.g., drug experience websites, blogs, etc.

It is important that all official internal information is shared with the UNODC global early warning system and/or CICAD, once it has been validated at the national level.

4. National Approaches to NPS

a. Substance Profiles

It is important for member states to establish individual profiles or dossiers on each substance as it emerges on their domestic drug market. These profiles would be easily and routinely updated with new information as it arises, and would be for use by all domestic agencies involved in addressing the emergence of the substance. These profiles could also be shared with other countries who might have just started to see the substance in their market.

These profiles could cover the following topics:

- source information, e.g., where the substance is being sold or purchased, where the substance is being imported from, how it is being imported, etc.
- domestic health effects that have been reported
- forensic lab information regarding the chemical properties of the substance
- available information regarding use and abuse

b. Laboratory Identification

It is important for member states to develop the technical capacity to identify the substance as it emerges in their illegal drug market. This includes the isolation of appropriate identification techniques, ensuring that the requisite technical capacity and equipment are available and mobilized for this purpose, and access to appropriate reference standards.

It is also recommended that member states collaborate in this area by sharing information about experience in assay development and practice. In this regard, member states could explore the design, development and implementation of on-line training courses in specific laboratory identification techniques and/or enhanced bilateral/sub-regional collaboration in order to facilitate capacity-building.

c. Risk Assessment

It is important for member states, once they have collected basic information for a substance profile, to determine what, if any, further action should be taken. In some instances, for example, no further action may be required because the risks associated with a particular substance or class of substances are not in fact as significant as they were originally made out to be. If this is the case, member states should however continue to monitor activity with the substance, in case new trends arise that warrant further action at a later date.

In other cases, there may be a need to carry out an assessment looking at the social, health and/or economic impacts associated with the use, manufacture and distribution of the substance. Such an assessment should also consider the level of involvement of organized crime in activities involving the substance, the nature of precursor chemicals involved in production, and options for control of the substance as well as possible consequences of implementing such controls. Of particular importance is information regarding the dismantling of illegal drug production establishments and the safe handling and disposition of materials coming from those establishments.

In other cases, it may be appropriate to take steps to educate the general public and first responders, e.g., law enforcement, hospital emergency departments, etc., regarding the substance.

For the public, the primary purpose of such risk communication efforts would be to signal the availability of the substance in the local market summarize the known or suspected health and safety risks associated with the substance, with a view to preventing use and distribution.

For law enforcement and health care providers, such risk communication efforts should highlight the importance of heightened vigilance and the need to report all interactions with the substance to competent authorities.

For hospitals, emergency personnel and poison control centers, the communication documents should emphasize the importance of reporting health effects to competent authorities. Risk communication messages regarding new psychoactive substances should also be integrated with existing demand reduction strategies.

d. Prevalence Assessment

Member states should consider including questions regarding new psychoactive substances in general or targeted drug use surveys so as to collect as much information regarding the prevalence of a particular substance or class of substances within their jurisdiction.

If survey results indicate a statistically significant change in use over a certain period of time, member states should consider undertaking a further assessment of the substance or class of substances.

e. Legislative Approaches

Member states should consider methods by which NPS can be controlled more quickly. Common means by which this can be achieved include but are not limited to:

- i) accelerated scheduling that allows for an individual substance or class of substances to be scheduled in less time, e.g., temporary scheduling authorities or other powers that allow the scheduling process to proceed more quickly;
- ii) analogues legislation that deems substances to be controlled by virtue of the fact that they are structurally similar to substances that are already controlled and have a similar pharmacological effect;
- iii) generic scheduling legislation that deems substances to be controlled by virtue of the fact that they share a common core molecular structure;
- iv) use of broader scheduling terminology, e.g., inclusion of terms such as ester, isomer, salt, etc., in existing scheduling entries;
- v) creation of a list of substances that are specifically designated as controlled by virtue of the fact that they are structurally or pharmacologically similar to substances that are already controlled, and
- vi) creation of a list of substances that are specifically designated as controlled but where only certain activities are prohibited, e.g., import, distribution but not for example, possession or production.