



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

DRUG OVERDOSE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Many overdose deaths can be avoided, says EMCDDA

(12.1.2005 LISBON) Drug overdose is one of the major causes of death among young people in Europe, yet many of these deaths can be avoided. This is the conclusion of the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** in a new edition in its *Drugs in focus* series out today, entitled 'Overdose – a major cause of avoidable death among young people'.

According to today's briefing, there were almost 100,000 reported overdose deaths between 1990 and 2002 in Western Europe (EU 15), with 8000 to 9000 deaths per year since 1996. But this figure probably underestimates the full extent of the tragedy, as under-reporting is likely to occur in many countries. Most cases involve consumption of heroin and other opiates, often in combination with other substances.

Most overdose fatalities occur among men aged between 20 and 40, and victims are typically experienced rather than new drug injectors. Mortality is generally higher among male opiate users than females due to their higher levels of risk-taking. In some countries, the number of years of life lost due to overdose among males of specific age ranges is now approaching that attributable to road traffic accidents.

Injecting drug users may be at particular risk of overdose when they mix heroin with other drugs, especially alcohol and benzodiazepines. They may also be at greater risk when they resume injecting after a period of abstinence when their tolerance is low, for example after time in prison or in detoxification treatment.

Across the EU, overdose deaths have decreased moderately or levelled off in recent years with clear decreases in some of the former EU Member States, following sharp rises through the 1980s and 1990s.

The **EMCDDA 2004 Annual report**, for example, revealed that drug-related deaths fell from 8,838 in 2000 to 8,306 in 2001 representing a small but significant 6% decrease. This may be attributable to increased provision of treatment and harm-reduction measures combined with reductions in levels of drug injecting and heroin availability. But, stresses the **EMCDDA**, the number of overdose deaths remains 'historically high'.

A central message for drug services

'That overdose is avoidable must become a central message and priority issue for drug services', says today's briefing. 'Because many opiate overdoses happen in the presence of others, an opportunity exists for timely intervention'.

Many overdose deaths can be prevented by increasing the proportion of drug users in treatment and reaching out to bring untreated users into contact with drug services. Other practical measures include educating users in avoiding risks but also in recognising overdoses in their peers and responding appropriately.

According to the **EMCDDA**, evidence strongly suggests that a significant reduction in drug overdose can only be achieved by implementing a broad range of interventions targeting different types of risk behaviour. In 2003, the Council of the European Union called on Member States to implement such a range of concrete services and facilities to reduce overdose deaths ⁽¹⁾.

Agency Chairman Marcel Reimen says: 'Overdose in the EU currently accounts for many more deaths among injecting drug users than does any other cause, including AIDS, but in the past the issue has been accorded only limited attention. It is encouraging that many countries are now introducing measures to cut overdoses, but much remains to be done to prevent these deaths.'

He adds: 'Without timely investment in proven and effective responses, the new EU Member States may now be about to face increases in overdose deaths similar to those observed in the 1980s and 1990s in west European countries, as heroin injecting could well rise in several of them'.

Notes to editors

This edition of *Drugs in focus* can be downloaded in 21 languages from *Publications/Drugs in focus*: <http://www.emcdda.eu.int>. This series of four-page policy briefings is designed to offer information and guidance to policy-makers on key issues in the drugs field.

(¹) June 2003 – The Council adopted a recommendation from the European Commission on preventing and reducing health-related harm associated with drug dependence. This was the first EC recommendation in the field of public health concerning drugs. Many countries have already incorporated its proposals (e.g. introducing risk-reduction initiatives) into their national drug strategies. See Chapter 1, *EMCDDA 2004 Annual report* (<http://annualreport.emcdda.eu.int>).