



FIRST INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON NEW DRUGS, 11–12 MAY 2011, LISBON

Leading European and international experts on new drugs met in Lisbon from 11–12 May at the **First international multidisciplinary forum on new drugs**, organised by the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)**.

The participating experts were invited for their technical expertise and research in the field of new psychoactive substances and included: forensic scientists; epidemiologists; clinicians; law-enforcement experts; and staff from European and international organisations.

In addition to participants from 27 EU countries, Croatia, Turkey and Norway, technical experts attended from: Australia, Belarus, Canada, Hong Kong SAR, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Switzerland and the United States.

The purpose of this technical forum was to:

- audit the state of play and provide a global overview on new drugs and 'legal highs';
- identify key issues, commonalities and differences in the experience of, and response to, this phenomenon;
- anticipate future challenges; and
- begin to chart a comprehensive vision for the future regarding how these substances will impact on drug use, responses and policies.

The themes covered were:

- *Global review: perspectives on a dynamic phenomenon*
- *Understanding the evidence: forensic science, a key component*
- *Epidemiology: auditing current capacity and identifying future priorities*
- *Making the most of the evidence: early warning*
- *Defining a balanced response agenda*
- *A comprehensive vision for the future*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A report on the forum proceedings will be made available in the coming weeks. Initial concluding remarks, delivered at the closing session on 12 May by EMCDDA Scientific Director Paul Griffiths, are listed below:

- The meeting confirmed that the issue of new drugs/'legal highs' has become a global phenomenon and is developing at an unprecedented pace. This First international multidisciplinary forum on new drugs offered a valuable opportunity to share expert views on how to better coordinate, respond and monitor this issue.
- A 'multidisciplinary' exploration of the issue was considered essential in the face of this multifaceted problem. The value of the 'global perspective' on the topic was also underlined and apparent in the updates provided by EU countries as well as by Australia, Belarus, Canada, Hong Kong SAR, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United States. These updates revealed important commonalities and differences between countries in the marketing, use and responses to this phenomenon.

- A general conclusion emerging from the forum was that there had been a paradigm shift in the drugs field, reflecting broader social processes. We live in times of globalisation and rapidly developing information technology and these changes are impacting on the drugs issue as they are on other areas of modern life. Developments in this area are now posing an increasing challenge to how we monitor, assess and respond to new psychoactive substances.
- The speed at which this phenomenon is developing is reflected, not only in the sheer number of substances appearing on the market, but also in their diversity and in how they are produced, distributed and marketed. This calls for a re-evaluation of both the information sources we use and the ways in which we disseminate information to inform policy, practice and the general public. In the area of education, prevention and treatment, we need to develop models appropriate to this emerging issue in order to anticipate possible future problems.
- Developing common concepts, terminology and instruments is essential to allow experiences to be shared and sound cross-country analyses to be formed. The Internet is increasingly an important medium both in terms of communication and as an information source.
- Underlined at the forum was the value of forensic science and research and the need for further investment in the area of new substances available on the market. An important challenge is the coordination of this work to allow findings to be shared and maximum benefit to accrue.
- The meeting also underlined the need for a more holistic analysis of the issue to allow us to understand better the interplay between established illicit drugs and new psychoactive substances. Important here is the development of theoretical models that could help predict the substances that may pose particular risks or have the potential to become established.
- The forum provided an opportunity to audit what we know about the availability and use of new psychoactive substances. An observation from the global updates was the remarkable speed at which these products had appeared in most world regions. However, it was also clear that, although information remains scarce on the prevalence and incidence of the use of these substances, overall in most countries, levels of use appear to be still low compared with those found with the more established illicit drugs. The meeting reviewed case studies that suggested that some of these new substances have the potential to be attractive to consumers and therefore monitoring future trends was clearly an important task.
- Discussion in the area of policy, focused on the need to understand the costs and benefits of different policy responses and the regulatory context in which they are applied. This meeting provided a valuable opportunity to review how countries were developing different regulatory approaches in this area.
- A final conclusion was the need to map out the future research agenda, particularly focusing on the need to better understand the possible acute and chronic health implications of the use of these new substances and to identify and monitor patterns and trends in their use.