



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

INFECTIOUS DISEASES, PROBLEM DRUG USE AND DRUG-RELATED DEATHS

Heterosexual transmission overtakes injecting drug use as route of new AIDS cases

(24.11.2005 LISBON) Heterosexual contacts have now overtaken injecting drug use as the most common route of new AIDS cases, warns the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** today in its **2005 Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in Europe**, launched in Brussels. While until 2001, the majority of new AIDS cases in the **EU** could be attributed to drug injecting, latest figures reveal that heterosexual transmission now accounts for the largest number ⁽¹⁾.

An important contributing factor says the **EMCDDA** ⁽²⁾, is the improved access for HIV-positive injecting drug users (IDUs) to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART)*. Over 75% of those needing HAART now have access to it in most of **Western Europe**, although in the **Baltic States** availability remains poor. In **Latvia**, for example, among IDUs already infected with HIV, cases of AIDS have risen significantly in recent years, suggesting a need to improve access to HAART ⁽³⁾.

Improved access for IDUs to treatment and harm-reduction services, and a decline in drug injecting in some countries, are also now impacting on rates of drug-related HIV transmission in Europe, says the **EMCDDA**.

Low HIV prevalence among IDUs, but hepatitis infections still high

Prevalence of HIV infection among IDUs remains low in most **EU Member States** and **candidate countries**. Infection rates stand at around, or below, 1% of IDUs in the **Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland**, the **UK, Bulgaria** and **Romania** and under 5% in **Germany, Lithuania** and **Luxembourg** (2001–2004).

Higher estimates (around, or in excess of, 10%), however, are reported from **Estonia, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland** and **Portugal**. But, says the report, rates of newly diagnosed HIV infection among IDUs in **Estonia** and **Latvia** have now 'fallen dramatically', suggesting that the recent epidemic in these two countries may have already peaked.

The news is less positive regarding hepatitis B and C, which are major causes of disease among IDUs in Europe. A large proportion of IDUs become infected with the hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV) within a few years of starting to inject. Studies in several countries – **Belgium, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal** and **Norway** – continue to find HCV infection rates of over 60% among IDUs (2002–2004).

Twenty-four **EU Member States** (except Cyprus), as well as **Norway, Bulgaria** and **Romania**, now provide sterile injecting equipment via needle and syringe programmes (NSPs) for IDUs. Although the extent of provision varies, in many countries coverage is substantial. Studies have shown NSPs can be effective in preventing infectious diseases and in bringing hard-to-reach drug users into contact with health and social services.

Up to 2 million problem drug users in the EU**

The **EMCDDA** estimates that there are between 1.2 and 2.1 million problem drug users in the enlarged **EU** today, of whom between 850,000 and 1.3 million are likely to be drug injectors.

Prevalence estimates since the mid to late 1990s show some rise in the number of problem drug users in **Denmark, Austria, Finland, Sweden** and **Norway**, while in the **Czech Republic, Germany, Greece** and **Ireland**, a stabilisation or decline. Elsewhere, no clear conclusions on trends can be drawn from the data available.

Data gathered from treatment centres and the monitoring of drug-related deaths suggest that numbers of new heroin users may have fallen across Europe as a whole, having peaked in most countries in the early 1990s.

Rates of injecting among heroin users in treatment have also declined in several **EU countries** – **Denmark, Greece, Spain, France, Italy** and the **UK** – with less than 50% of new opiate users entering specialist drug treatment services reporting to be injectors. Rates are low in **Spain**, the **Netherlands** and **Portugal** at under 30%. Some notable exceptions are **Finland** and several **new EU Member States**, where injecting remains the main mode of administration among heroin users.

The **EMCDDA** says that there are strong indications that drug problems in Europe have diversified in recent years, with those in treatment now more likely to report problems involving cocaine (including crack) and cannabis or the use of more than one drug (polydrug use) (see news release No 9).

Overdose still the main cause of death among opiate users, but numbers of young fatalities now falling

Overdose is still 'the main cause of death among opiate users in the EU' says today's report, and 'one of the leading causes of death among young people in Europe'. But in most of the **EU-15 countries** – except **Finland** and **Sweden** – and except **Norway**, there is now a lower proportion of overdose deaths under the age of 25 than a decade ago, suggesting a fall in the recruitment of young addicts and the number of young injectors. Accordingly, in most **EU-15 countries**, the average age of overdose cases has risen since 1990.

The picture is different in the **new EU Member States** and **candidate countries** reporting data, where deaths under 25 increased substantially from the mid-1990s to 2002. The average age of overdose cases is lowest in **Romania** (22.4 years), **Estonia** (24 years), **Latvia** (29 years) and **Lithuania** (29.3 years). The number of overdose deaths has now stabilised in the **Czech Republic, Latvia, Hungary** and **Bulgaria**.

Across the **EU**, drug-related deaths remain at historically high levels, says the report, but there are signs that these may have already peaked. Following a 40% increase between 1990 and 2000 (**EU-15**), many countries now report a decline to figures similar to those found in the early 1990s. This positive trend may be due to a stabilisation or decline in the number of opiate users, a fall in injecting drug use in some countries and better provision of treatment.

The total number of reported drug-related deaths from the **EU-15 countries** and **Norway** fell from 8 394 in 2001 to 7 122 cases in 2002, representing a 15% decrease, although there are some signs that this clear decline may now be levelling off ⁽⁴⁾.

Definitions and notes

* HAART: Treatment for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection that uses a combination of several antiretroviral drugs. The drugs inhibit the ability of the virus to multiply in the body, and they slow down the development of AIDS.

** The EMCDDA's operational definition of problem drug use is 'injecting drug use or long duration/regular use of opiates, cocaine and/or amphetamines'.

⁽¹⁾ See 2005 Statistical bulletin – Figure INF-2 – <http://www.stats05.emcdda.eu.int>

⁽²⁾ Figures based on collaborative work with the European Centre for the Epidemiological Monitoring of AIDS (EuroHIV) and WHO Regional Office for Europe.

⁽³⁾ See 2005 Statistical bulletin – Figure INF-1 – <http://www.stats05.emcdda.eu.int>

⁽⁴⁾ See 2005 Statistical bulletin – Figure DRD-G8 – <http://www.stats05.emcdda.eu.int> (Not all 15 countries reported data).