

# REPORT

## World Health Assembly (WHA)

### INTER-MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE

#### “Essential medicines under international control: ensuring equitable and affordable access to and safe use for all”

23 May 2023, 13:00-14:00, Hotel President Wilson, Geneva (Switzerland)

*Co-organized by the Global Commission on Drug Policy and the World Health Organization (WHO) and co-sponsored by Switzerland, Colombia and Bolivia.*

- The event was moderated by Michel Kazatchkine, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy and brought together the following speakers: **Yukiko Nakatani** (WHO Assistant Director-General for access to medicines and health products), **Ambassador Nora Kronig Romero** (Director of the Federal Office of Public Health of Switzerland), **Ghada Whaly** (Executive Director of UNODC), **Jaime Urrego** (Vice- Minister of Health of Colombia), **Ricardo Leite** (Founder and President of the UNITE Parliamentarians Network for Global Health) and **Dr. Zukiswa Zingela** (Chair of the working group on access to control substances of the International Narcotics Control Board (the INCB)). After the various speeches, time was also provided for people to take the floor for comments and questions.
- Michel Kazatchkine opened the event, recalling how in July 2022, the Director General of WHO, Dr. Tedros, had met with members of the Global Commission on Drug Policy and together agreed to create a series of Inter-Ministerial Dialogues on drug policy-related issues in Geneva, Switzerland over three years. Due to the urgency of advancing in the area of access to medicines under control, it was chosen as the first topic to be addressed in these dialogues and Michel Kazatchkine stressed how the world needs to move out of complacency and stagnation on this issue.
- **Yukiko Nakatani** (WHO Assistant Director-General for access to medicines and health products, began her speech by reminded everyone that millions of people around the world rely on medicines that are under international control, and which the WHO considers to be essential. However, Yukiko Nakatani stressed that millions of people suffer needlessly, because these essential medicines – which are meant to be available at all times to those who need them - are out of reach. As an example, 97% of the needs for immediate release morphine - an essential medicine for the management of pain and palliative care - in low and middle income countries remains unmet. Yukiko Nakatani shared how together with the

United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), the WHO has called for international cooperation to increase appropriate measures to mitigate the risk of shortage of the controlled medicines.

- **Ghada Whaly** (Executive Director of UNODC) also emphasized the point that millions of people worldwide are suffering due to a lack of access to essential medicines, with an alarming gap in availability between the global North and South. For example, in 2020, the number of doses of controlled pain medication available per 1 million inhabitants in North America was 7500 times higher than in all of West and Central Africa. In terms of developments that are taking place, last year, on the 45th anniversary of the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines, Ghada Whaly and the Chair of the CND, together the Director General of the WHO, and the President of the INCB, launched the access and availability initiative “No patient left behind” , which includes a new e-learning tool highlighting the policy commitments and challenges related to the availability of controlled substances. Ghada Whaly closed her remarks by emphasizing the importance of putting people at the center of drug responses, and closing the global pain divide once and for all.
  
- **Ambassador Nora Kronig Romero** (Director of the Federal Office of Public Health of Switzerland) pointed to the fact that there are 12 controlled substances that are scheduled as well as illegal drugs in the United Nations International Drug Conventions, but which are also essential medicines by WHO. They serve the population and they are there to help in pain relief, anesthesia, mental health, maternal health and other conditions, but their access is not guaranteed and represents one of the most pressing global health issues : 5.5 billion people out of the world’s total population does not have access, has inadequate access, or remotely no access to these substances. She raised the fact that 93% of the morphine used globally, is consumed in Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, leaving more than 80% of the world's population behind. Ms Kronig Romero stressed that it is time for the WHO, the INCB and the UNODC; through the World Health Assembly and through the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) to act to address this avoidable crisis of pain, of access to its relief. She also pointed out that, as a member of the CND, Switzerland has brought the issue to the fore of its agenda, but we still must all do more to promote access to controlled substances for low and middle income countries. She emphasized that it is our common responsibility to provide access to alleviate pain, while reducing the risk of diversion to the illegal drug market ; and that Switzerland is committed to this objective.
  
- **Jaime Urrego** (Vice- Minister of Health of Colombia) stressed how important the discussion on equal access to essential medicines under international control is, as it provides the opportunity to acknowledge how essential the protection of human rights in drug policies is; and how we must choose

a preventive approach over a repressive one. He noted how the President of Colombia, Mr. Gustavo Petro, has stated Colombia's interest in becoming an international reference in comprehensive solidary drug policy making backed by regulatory frameworks focused on protecting human rights and environmental justice. Access to purchase and production of these medicines however remains a challenge in the South-American region and Colombia believes that access to and availability of effective, safe and affordable medication is a prerequisite to guarantee people's right to health care. He stressed that that is why we must promote local manufacturing and competitiveness, price transparency and international mechanisms that guarantee the availability of these essential medicines at an affordable price. Mr. Urrego commended the Human Rights Council in Geneva's recent efforts (including passing the resolution on the importance of human rights issues in drug policy) and reiterated Colombia's commitment to protecting the dignity of its people, communities, country and environment ; and to promoting a more active role for the WHO in this area.

- **Ricardo Leite** (founder and President of the UNITE Parliamentarians Network for Global Health) noted that **after** so many years of discussing these issues, we're always at the same point. The balance sheet of the War on Drugs has been very negative, with a rise of deaths, a rise of pain, loss of quality of life, judicial systems overburdened, and a lot of humanity and dignity having been lost in the process. It is also worrying to see certain places in the world steps backwards. Restrictive, prohibitionist policies are having exactly the opposite effect of what was intended. Addiction needs to be addressed from a health angle, with harm reduction services being provided universally. Parliamentarians have to take the stand, governments have to take a stand, so that we can promote international collaboration, facilitate knowledge exchange among our countries, and most importantly, use science and data to deliver better policy that can lead to the rise of the quality of life and well-being of the populations around the world.

#### **Comments from the floor**

- **The Ambassador from Bolivia** took the floor to say that this event is important not only to promote equal access to medicines, but also to ensure the respect and protection of human rights and dignity of all when we are formulating and implementing drug policies. She also noted how important it is to acknowledge the Indigenous systems, and knowledge and practices of Indigenous people as well as the traditional medicine/health practices. Mme Ambassador recalled the reservations that Bolivia has in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs regarding the right to allow the traditional chewing of the coca leaf in Bolivia, highlighting that it is a very important and cultural issue, because Indigenous people in Bolivia use coca for medical purposes.
- **A representative from Armenia** shared the experience regarding the methadone program which was implemented in Armenia with help of Global Fund and how now it is a fully state funded program,

backed up by solid data that shows that the program has been beneficial for patients as well as the broader community.

- **A representative from Algeria** noted that 154 intermediary addiction centres have been set up in Algeria to deal with all kinds of addictions. In January 2021, methadone was introduced and there are currently 7 addiction centres providing methadone substitution therapy. However, the availability of methadone still remains a significant challenge; there are very few producers of these products ; and difficulties in accessing them, which is why we are asking the WHO and the UNODC to try to widen the range of producers, so that we can have easy access to these products.
- **The Director General of Health of Samoa** shared how two months ago the country ran out of 40% of all its essential medicines. Essential Medicines are not only just painkillers, but also antibiotics, drugs for diabetics, and in Samoa about 27% of the adult population are diabetics. He asked the WHO and other partners to provide a list of all the drug companies in other countries such as India, Indonesia, which are quality assured, so that Samoa can order directly from them, at a more affordable price.
- **Naomi Burke Shine** (Executive Director of Harm Reduction International) focused on a few figures, noting how globally, there are 87 countries that make agonist therapy available to people who have drug dependence and this is really important, with the number dropping to 59 when you look at access to opiate agonist therapy in prisons. She also pointed out that there is always so much more time, energy and investment focused on preventing the diversion of drugs to the illicit market, when that is not the issue we need to focus on anymore. Instead, emphasis need to be placed on the « health and well-being of mankind ».
- **The Minister of Health of Trinidad and Tobago** noted that as a small country of 1.4 million people, they had the same problem of non-availability of drugs, but he stated that there are avenues under WHO where you can get drugs that WHO has approved (pre-approved lists).

### **Closing remarks**

- **Zukiswa Zingela** (Chair of the working group on access to control substances of the International Narcotics Control Board referred to the 2022 INCB report which reveals that while some progress has been made (for example, 60% of responding countries have changed their national legislation in the past five years and 45% have reviewed or changed administrative as well as regulatory mechanisms, which have resulted in some positive impact on the mechanism of access to controlled substances), there remains a significant imbalance with regard to controlled substances globally. The consumption of opioid analgesics, which is very low in most of Africa and parts of Asia remains an ongoing challenge, while the consumption of anti-epileptic drugs including Phenobarbital, is not an issue in Africa, Asia and Oceania, relative to areas in America and Europe, despite this substance being one of the most used anticonvulsants medications on the essential medications list. Zukiswa Zingela also referred to the opioid overdose epidemic, noting that the question to ask is “how do strike a balance to make sure that everybody who requires essential medication has access to them in a way that is

affordable while ensuring that those who are currently experiencing a crisis and living with problems such as opioid addiction also have available treatment like opioid agonist therapy? » Recommendations of the INCB include the following: for governments to consider allocating sufficient resources to ensure the adequate availability of controlled substances ; for countries to review pricing and production policies of medicines for low and middle income countries ; and the strengthening of national and regional production of pharmaceuticals in their generic form so that cheaper procurement with shorter delivery time is made possible.

- Finally, Michel Sidibé, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, emphasized that legal regulation is key, and that it is essential to consult local laws, regulations and healthcare professionals to obtain the most accurate and up to date information regarding the status of controlled medicine in a specific jurisdiction. Michel Sidibé ended by reaffirming the Global Commission on Drug Policy's commitment to ensuring equitable access to essential medicines, particularly to ease the pain medication for pain relief ; and thanked everyone for coming to the dialogue.

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