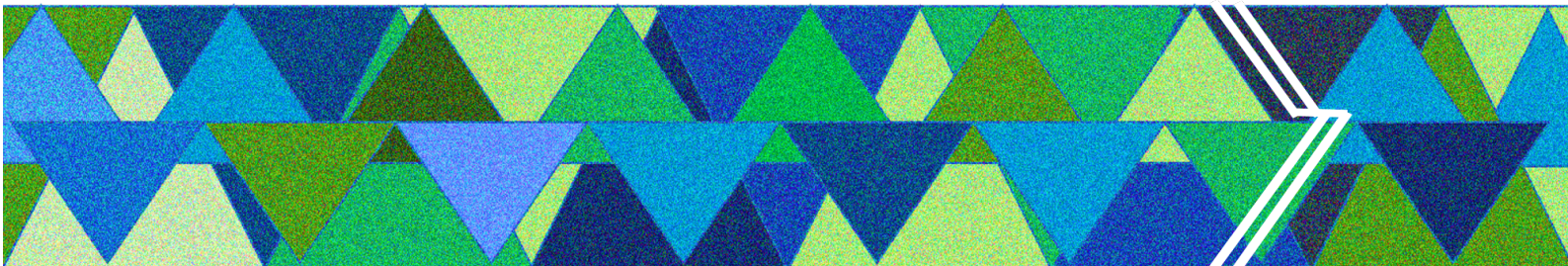


UNODC Informal Scientific Network Meeting, Vienna
“The Role of Science in Addressing the Global Opioid Crisis”

Informal Scientific Network Statement
13 March 2018

The opioid crisis represents a global challenge due to the high morbidity and mortality associated with this complex phenomenon. In North America, the key factors associated with the current opioid overdose problem include opioid prescription practices for management of pain, availability of pure, cheap heroin and a combination of socio-cultural and economic factors that have contributed to this alarming situation. As this could also pose a threat to the rest of the world, it represents an opportunity to apply effective prevention interventions, which are particularly urgent considering the rapid emergence of highly potent synthetic opioids.

Given that drug use disorders are chronic and relapsing in nature, access to comprehensive, evidence-based, and quality drug treatment services is essential. In the case of opioids, treatment with agonist or antagonist medications, combined with psychosocial support are effective in treating opioid use disorders and preventing overdoses. Furthermore, the strong therapeutic alliance established between the patient and a health service provider, and the individualized case by case approach, which ensures that the specific needs of each patient are addressed, are amongst the most important factors to ensure the effectiveness of drug treatment.



National policies, strategies and guidelines should be in place to promote prevention, quality treatment and care of drug use disorders. This should include the participation of the health care system, and the implementation of prevention and treatment interventions that are tailored to the particular needs of countries.

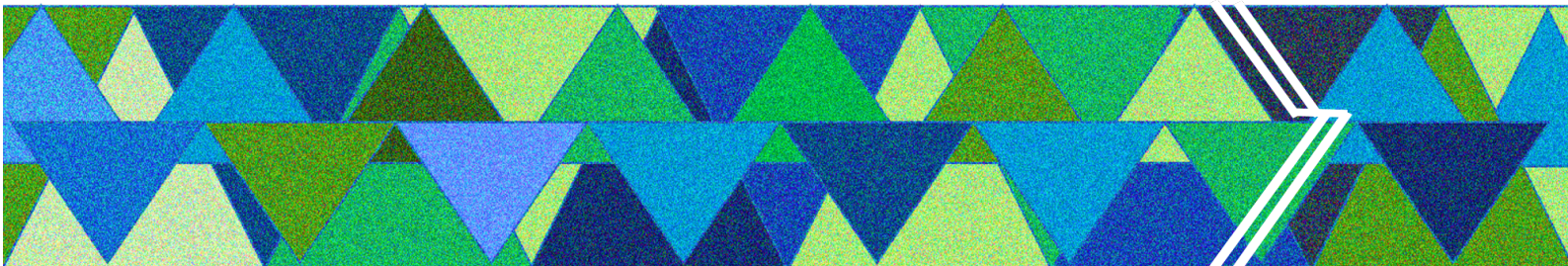
As there is a high rate of relapse and overdose deaths following prison release, the involvement of the criminal justice system in the provision of drug dependence treatment and opioid overdose prevention measures, during and upon release, is essential.

Adequate management of pain in accordance with latest international guidelines should be promoted, acknowledging the sufficient scientific evidence supporting that opioids should not be the first line response to chronic pain. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that opioids can be essential for the management of acute severe pain. Increasing the capacity of professionals across the health system to ensure proper pain management and drug dependence treatment and care, is needed.

Systematic data collection, monitoring and evaluation, and implementation of early warning systems are necessary for countries to prevent and develop strategies to cope with abuse and misuse of opioids, including new synthetic emerging opioids.

Treatment of opioid use disorders and overdose prevention include the following:

- Access to methadone, buprenorphine and extended release injectable naltrexone, as effective opioid overdose prevention medications. Treatment of opioid use disorders is a protective factor.
- Access to naloxone, including effective and affordable formulations that prevent overdose deaths, whether with a prescription or over the counter.

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- Training of health care professionals and other first responders (e.g. family, peer-users, police, firefighters, social workers, etc.) in the administration of naloxone and other life-saving resuscitation techniques.
 - Individuals that experienced an overdose in the past are at greater risk of overdosing again. Engaging them in treatment for their opioid use disorder following an overdose is recommended, including, when available, the initiation of buprenorphine medication in the emergency department.
 - Engaging individuals with an opioid use disorder, whether at an early or more advanced stage in drug treatment (emergency department, primary care, obstetricians, infectious disease and STD doctors, etc.) and other specialized services (e.g. pharmacists), within the health care system.
 - Providing integrated treatment to address psychiatric and medical comorbidities including suicidality, HCV and HIV.
 - Ensuring the provision of outreach services in the community to encourage individuals to access treatment.
 - Identifying the risk of overdose associated to poly-drug use caused by drug interactions and severity of addiction, such as between opioids and methamphetamines, or alcohol and benzodiazepines, and the importance of accurate diagnosis and treatment.



The Informal Scientific Network recommends the following:

- Increasing access to quality, evidence-based treatment of opioid drug use disorders.
- WHO and UNODC to develop a joint strategy together with relevant stakeholders with the objective of ensuring availability of key medicines at affordable price, particularly for countries where price would otherwise constitute a barrier to the access to essential medications for the treatment of opioid use disorders and life-saving medications such as naloxone, for opioid overdose reversal.
- Facilitating research with controlled substances, including synthetic opioids, to generate new knowledge on how to use these substances to revert overdoses or adverse effects. As stated in the UN Conventions, controlled substances should be available for medical and scientific purposes, thus barriers to conducting such research should be removed.
- Inviting WHO to conduct an update of the guidelines for treatment of opioid dependence and initiate the development of new guidelines for the management of chronic non-cancer pain.
- Recognizing the burden caused by the chronic pain condition, there is a need for the provision of adequate pain management to avoid misuse.

The Informal Scientific Network also highlights the importance of comprehensive and evidence-based drug demand reduction strategies that include prevention of drug use, treatment of drug use disorders and recovery.

At the same time, the Network emphasizes the relevance of ensuring that none of these measures limit the proper administration and access to opioids for those who need them.