

Vienna International Centre, P.O. Box 500, A-1400 Vienna, Austria  
Telephone: +43-1-26060, Telefax: +43-1-26060-5867 / 5868  
E-Mail: [incb.opioids@un.org](mailto:incb.opioids@un.org) Internet Address: <http://www.incb.org/>

*Check against delivery*

**Statement by Matthew Nice  
Manager, Global OPIOIDS Project  
International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)**

**United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
2 October 2018, Washington D.C., United States of America**

Good morning Chairman Grassley, Co-Chairman Feinstein, distinguished Members of the caucus. It is a pleasure to be here today to outline how the International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) global OPIOIDS Project is helping to address the opioids crisis in the United States and well beyond its borders by supporting government and private-sector efforts to identify and interdict the sales and distribution of illicit, non-medical synthetic opioids and fentanyl-related substances.

The INCB is a UN-based, international body established by the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, a treaty that enjoys near universal adherence. The Board consists of 13 experts nominated by governments or the World Health Organization and elected by the UN. The Board monitors treaty compliance and seeks to ensure that adequate supplies of drugs are available for legitimate medical and scientific purposes; to prevent diversion of drugs for illicit use; to provide controls over chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of drugs; and to assist governments in preventing the diversion of chemicals used to make drugs into illicit channels.

One of the Board's main advantages is that it can serve as a neutral convener of governments, as well as international and private-sector entities such as international postal and courier services, all of whom are threatened by the global opioid crisis. The INCB is strategically positioned as a platform to foster dialog, improve international information exchange, and to help craft practical actions to help counter international drug trafficking. The INCB works closely with other international bodies, including the World Health Organization and the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. And the Board plays a special role in the Commission on Narcotic Drugs' annual process schedule emerging drugs and precursors so that they can be universally controlled by governments worldwide.

The Board recognized early on that the alarming increase in overdose deaths from non-medical synthetic opioids in North America threatened to become a global challenge. And the Board also recognized that the critical process for placing individually emerging fentanyl-related substances under international control was being outpaced by the rapid emergence of new analogues – substances that were chemically distinctive from those under control but had the same – or even worse – effects when abused. Because of that challenge, the Board initiated its global Operational Partnerships to Interdict Opioids' Illicit Distribution and Sales (OPIOIDS) Project.

The OPIOIDS Project is the only current international effort solely dedicated to developing partnerships with governments, international agencies and the private sector to share information and intelligence with the goal of identifying and interdicting illicit manufacturers, distributors and vendors of non-medical synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, fraudulent oxycodone and tramadol.

The OPIOIDS Project would not be possible without the generous support of the United States Congress through the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The OPIOIDS Project has also benefited greatly from the support and partnership of the Drug Enforcement Administration's Special Operations Division, the United States Postal Inspection Service, and the Customs and Border Protection Service.

The world is currently in the midst of a global opioids overdose epidemic. Although this crisis manifests itself differently region to region, demand drives the illicit manufacture, online sales, trafficking and distribution of fentanyl-related substances. The pure substances can be rapidly engineered and clandestinely manufactured in facilities located almost anywhere. Similarly, processing into packaged consumer units, such as tablets, nasal sprayers, or LSD-type blotter paper, can occur anywhere. And with some of these substances fatal at the milligram level, inconsistent reprocessing further drives overdose deaths.

WHO<sup>1</sup> conservatively estimates 450,000 people died as a result of drug misuse in 2015, with 168,000 of those deaths associated with overdoses. This rate has increased globally by 60 per cent since 2000.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that overdoses in the United States alone increased to 72,000 in 2017; 49,000 of those were opioids-related.<sup>3</sup>

While reported rates of overdose deaths worldwide currently remain far lower than in the United States and Canada, indications of the potential for synthetic opioids expansion have been reported in other regions. European Union members report increases in synthetic opioids in its illicit drug markets, with 38 new substances detected since 2009; 28 were fentanyls. The rates are also accelerating with a third of new fentanyls emerging in 2017.<sup>4</sup> Australia reports overdose deaths for opioids in 2016 have nearly doubled since 2007. Attributed mostly to pharmaceutical opioids and, in combinations, with heroin, overdoses due to synthetic opioid analgesics, such as fentanyl and tramadol, increased more than 10-fold during the same period.<sup>5</sup>

Today online vendors are readily found on the surface internet, darknet and social media sites offering synthetic opioids. Purchases can be made using online payment services or anonymous cryptocurrencies. Shipments are trafficked among the billions of letters and express parcels shipped around the world through international mail and courier services.

Due to their extreme potency, fentanyl shipments tend to be in tiny amounts making detection difficult. Furthermore, shipments are often part of freight forwarding consignments sent via unsuspecting third countries, rendering risk assessments less accurate. Law enforcement, customs, postal, and canine units are at greater risk of exposure. Indeed, toxicology assessments are often how new psychoactive substances are first detected.

Given the rapidly changing global opioids market, the challenges of detection, and the lack of international controls for an expanding number of substances, interdiction efforts rely increasingly upon government cooperation, private industry support, and rapid intelligence sharing. Details from each online sale, suspicious shipment, drug or illicit laboratory seizure, represents valuable intelligence, when shared.

---

<sup>1</sup> WHO, Public health dimension of the world drug problem. Report by the Secretariat to the 70th World Health Assembly. A70/29. 27 March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> World Drug Report 2018 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.XI.9).

<sup>3</sup> CDC WONDER. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

<sup>4</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2018), European Drug Report 2018: Trends and Developments, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

<sup>5</sup> Roxburgh, A., Dobbins, T., Degenhardt, L. and Peacock, A. (2018). Opioid-, amphetamine-, and cocaine-induced deaths in Australia: August 2018. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW

### **Concrete Steps Taken by the OPIOIDS Project**

The OPIOIDS Project has helped to coordinate information sharing across governments. The Project takes a multi-agency, private and public sector approach to significantly increase the probability of linking information so that we can help our partners identify specific points of manufacture, processing and re-distribution. The Project has focused on building strategic partnerships that raise awareness and develop operational intelligence, allowing other partners to focus on prevention, treatment and research.

At the request of the United States, last year the INCB initiated a rapid review of two key chemicals, referred to as precursors—ANPP and NPP—used in the manufacture of fentanyl and recommended to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs that they be placed under international control. Six months following the Commission’s action, the substances were placed under international control, and shipments of these substances are now monitored prior to their export from a country to ensure the shipment is for a legitimate purpose and to reduce the likelihood of diversion from trade.

With committed support from Governments and international partners, the INCB has also been strengthening cooperation with the private sector to help prevent legitimate services from being misused by traffickers and to disrupt illicit sales and distribution. Beginning early 2018, the INCB convened the first in a series of expert working groups involving industry experts and the international community.

In January 2018, the INCB convened an expert working group of major e-commerce companies, concerned Governments, and international cyber experts to identify practical steps to disrupt online surface and so-called “dark web” marketing and sales of fentanyl. Partnering with private industry leaders, including major Chinese and Korean-based e-commerce companies, Alibaba, EC21 and Tencent, who voluntarily agreed to begin or further enhance efforts to identify and remove vendors exploiting their e-commerce platforms for the selling of fentanyl-related substances. Shown practical and effective, INCB is further expanding similar industry cooperation efforts.

To address dangerous fentanyl from being trafficked through the international and national postal systems, INCB entered into a cooperation agreement with the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in April 2018. This innovative partnership includes provisions for information and intelligence exchange on sources and trafficking patterns of dangerous substances, promoting technical assistance and training for officers.

Following on the implementation of the UPU cooperation agreement, in April 2018, the OPIOIDS Project invited 25 experts from the Global Express Association— the association representing DHL, FedEx Express and UPS— the international express mail services (EMS), international partners and concerned Governments, to identify measures to disrupt shipping of fentanyl and other dangerous substances. Postal inspectors and related officials operating in international mail facilities were provided notification alerts, access to incident communications and that the range of dangerous substances communicated was broadened.

In its work focusing on interdiction of known fentanyl found in circulation, the OPIOIDS Project provided Governments, and through them private industry partners, a target list of 93 fentanyl-related substances with no known legitimate medical or industrial purposes. The INCB requested Governments and industry to voluntarily refrain from their manufacture, import, export or distribution, and to communicate to the OPIOIDS Project when such incidents occur. The list was subsequently distributed to e-commerce working group partners to further identify and removed vendors obfuscating fentanyl sales by using their technical chemical names.

The OPIOIDS Project has what we refer to as ‘focal points’ within national governments to communicate alerts and to access the INCB secure communication platform, IONICS.

Designed to function on smart devices and in low-bandwidth environments, IONICS provides a platform for cooperating governments to access real-time communications of illicit manufacture, trafficking and suspicious shipments incidents involving new psychoactive substances, including fentanyl. Incidents are communicated across police, customs, forensic, regulatory and related government and international partners, such as the World Customs Organization.

Since January, more than 200 officers from 67 Governments and international agencies have become focal points for OPIOIDS Project communications. Additionally, some 200 incidents involving the import, export, shipment or manufacture of new psychoactive substances have been communicated to registered IONICS users; 57 per cent were for synthetic opioids and suspected fentanyl-related substances. The intelligence shared via the OPIOIDS Project has led to additional global alert notifications being issued by the INCB.

More can be done to improve interdiction efforts and to prevent synthetic opioids from spreading into more markets. Among the efforts we intend to pursue are an expansion of voluntary industry cooperation, developing guidelines for our private sector partners, training and codes of conduct for broader geographic regions and sectors. Exchanging intelligence from past shipments of darknet platforms already seized will help our partners further develop intelligence-based enforcement responses. Assessing how precursors and illicit manufacturing equipment, such as tableting machines, are obtained will point us toward ways to interdict these new, unconventional threats. And increasing the number of Governments and agencies using IONICS and the volume and quality intelligence shared is paramount to the success of interdiction efforts. The INCB is already coordinating several of these activities, but more efforts will be needed.

### **Concluding remarks**

2018 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the last international drug control treaty, the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Today's global drug landscape is far more complex and challenging than in 1988, with more sophisticated technology, vastly different communication infrastructure, and globalized trade facilitating links in the nexus of drug trafficking, organized crime, and now violent extremism.

INCB initiatives, like the global OPIOIDS Project, represent practical, operational approaches that bring together Governments, international organizations, and private industry partners to develop new capabilities to interdict illicit opioids distribution and sales. These innovative efforts help to protect our citizens, our frontline personnel and the communities they serve from exposure to these extraordinarily harmful substances.

Thank you.