



30 August, 2010

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Overdose Awareness Day: Community organizations call for wider availability of naloxone to prevent thousands of unnecessary deaths

Dear leaders of the UN agencies:

Tomorrow, August 31st is International Overdose Awareness Day and community organizations are commemorating the day by calling for wider availability of naloxone, the medicine for averting drug overdose, which would save thousands of lives each year. We appeal to UN agencies to step up their efforts and make this life-saving drug available to our communities.

Overdose is a leading cause of death, taking nearly as many lives as car accidents in many countries. In the European Union, for example, since 1995, overdose has claimed between 6300 and 8200 lives each yearⁱ. In Russia alone, over 9000ⁱⁱ overdose-related deaths are registered each year. The real numbers of deaths are thought to be much higher than the officially registered cases. Moreover, overdose is often a leading cause of death among people living with HIV in places where large proportions of people living with HIV are opioid injectors as has been documented in the United States, Russia and elsewhere.

Naloxone, an inexpensive, safe, non-narcotic, and highly effective medication with no potential for abuse reverses opioid overdose. It is included in the World Health Organization's Model List of Essential Medicines and is often available in hospitals and emergency services. In more than 15 countries, harm reduction programs, are also distributing naloxone directly to drug users as part of their basic package of services. By doing so they are saving lives, attracting more people to HIV services and empowering communitiesⁱⁱⁱ. The Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria recently issued a statement^{iv} that it would fund naloxone programming as did the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)^v. Just two weeks ago the Scottish government announced that it would scale up naloxone programming nation-wide.

We hereby urge the UN agencies to take the following specific actions to promote the scale up of naloxone programmes:

- Promote and support the research necessary to document the effectiveness of distributing naloxone directly to communities who use drugs including those in resource limited settings;
- Include overdose mitigation programming in the Technical Guide for countries to set targets for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care for injecting drug users and add this in piloting the Technical Guide;
- Support improved surveillance of overdose as a cause of death including among people living with HIV to support addressing overdose in national HIV and drug programs;
- To conduct a consultation on overcoming barriers and good practices in changing policies and practices to enable distribution of naloxone directly to communities of people who use drugs;
- To issue a policy brief on overdose mitigation from a non-communicable disease perspective and infectious disease perspectives;
- Educate UN regional and country staff on the issues around overdose and its mitigation.

We thank you for your attention to this important matter and look forward to your committed actions.

Sincerely yours,



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ⁱ (EMCDDA 2010) Statistical Bulletin, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) 2010. p. 15

ⁱⁱ (Koshkina 2008) Koshkina EA, "Mortality associated with drug use", presentation at "Use of epidemiological methods for drug users mortality researches", Petrozavodsk, Russia, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ (EHRN 2010) Why Overdose Matters for HIV, Eurasian Harm Reduction Network and Open Society Institute, 2010

^{iv} Harm Reduction Information Note, GFATM 2010

http://www.theglobalfund.org/documents/rounds/10/R10_InfoNote_HarmReduction_en.pdf

^v Comprehensive HIV Prevention for People Who Inject Drugs, Revised Guidance 2010, The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) <http://www.pepfar.gov/documents/organization/144970.pdf>