

**61<sup>ST</sup> COMMISSION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS**  
**SPECIAL EVENT “TAKING ACTION TO INCREASE ACCESS TO CONTROLLED DRUGS FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES WHILE**  
**PREVENTING THEIR DIVERSION AND MISUSE”**  
**STATEMENT BELGIUM, FEDERAL MINISTRY OF HEALTH**  
**15<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2018**

Thank you Chair,  
Your excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights includes *“the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including medical care and necessary social services”*. Promoting the health, welfare and well-being of all is at the core of the three international drug conventions.

Ensuring the availability of and access to quality-assured controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes, such as emergency surgery, the treatment of mental and neurological disorders, pain management for cancer patients and the delivery of palliative care, is one of the most essential strategies to respect these rights and to accomplish these goals. Moreover, achieving universal health coverage, including access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines is one of the sustainable development goals we have all agreed to.

Nevertheless, the under treatment of pain has been reported in more than 150 countries. The treatment of pain in children and adolescents is inadequate and under-researched. Less than 10% of the children who need pain medications in the world receive it. This lack of availability and access leads to unnecessary suffering. The INCB calls this situation correctly *“the global pain divide”*. We should no longer accept this suffering.

Belgium is pleased that the UNGASS Outcome Document brought us an important legacy : a joint commitment and specific operational recommendations to address this problem. The outcome document and its operational recommendations set the framework for our policies and work in this area for the coming years, if not the coming decade.

Ladies and gentlemen, we believe urgent action is needed and all necessary tools to take action are available.

Let me highlight three recommendations from the UNGASS outcome document and the available instruments.

The UNGASS outcome document recommends **reviewing domestic legislation and other regulatory mechanisms**. The country assessment checklist as provided by the WHO in its document entitled 'Ensuring balance in national policies on controlled substances' is an efficient tool in this regard.

Second, the UNGASS document stresses the **importance of strengthening the capacity of competent national authorities to adequately estimate and assess the need for controlled substances**. In the 'Guide on estimating requirements for substances under international control', INCB and WHO provide all technical elements for countries in order to perform these analyses. The INCB, through its learning program, provides support to countries to improve and perfect these estimates. Belgium provides financial support to the INCB learning program which seeks to strengthen the capacity of competent national authorities to comply with these demands by providing tailor-made training in Frenchspeaking countries in Africa. Thereby, and together with France, we hope to contribute to addressing the specific barrier of estimates and assessments for medical needs.

Thirdly, the UNGASS outcome document recommends to **"take measures to provide capacity-building and training of health care professionals"**, such as medical doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Many countries, such as Belgium, develop and implement clinical guidelines, provide learning programs for health care professionals and launch awareness-building initiatives among the population.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is clear that technical expertise in this area is available within UNODC, INCB and WHO. Belgium believes that the three organizations should further join forces. We were very pleased to see the inclusion of access to controlled medicines as a pillar in the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed between UNODC and WHO and the creation of the UNODC/WHO/UICC joint program on *"Access to Controlled Drugs for Medical Purposes While Preventing Diversion and Abuse"*.

We hope this joint program will grow and gain further efficiency in the future. Belgium, through the Federal Ministry of Health, decided to start financing this program for the implementation of a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The project has a double focus: a legislative and policy review on the one hand, and capacity building among healthcare providers on the other. A strong implication of civil society organizations is essential and guaranteed in this project. The final results will be available in July of this year.

Madam Chair, we commend the UNODC on the organization of an expert meeting in September last year on the issue of access and availability. We welcome the advanced draft of the technical guide which will be of supplementary support for countries for improving their policies.

Ladies and gentlemen, experience has shown that ensuring adequate availability and access requires a thorough engagement from all relevant stakeholders : policy makers, the scientific community, civil society, industry, but also patients and their families. We indeed stress the importance of including patients and their families. Patients' well-being is what it is all about. Patients and their families can identify and address stigma and barriers from a community perspective, and can play a pivotal role in raising awareness among policy makers and health care providers. Therefore, we consider inclusive multi-stakeholder-networks or platforms as important mechanisms to strengthen engagements and to reinforce the necessary ownership by all partners in order to ensure success and foster sustainability of the variety of measures that will be taken.

Madam Chair, ensuring an adequate availability of and access to controlled substances also means preventing the **diversion**. We cannot ignore the rise of the non-medical use of synthetic opioids in some parts of the world. This situation is worrying and constitutes a threat to the lives and wellbeing of many people in the affected countries. Every measure to address this challenge in an efficient way deserves our support. However, we also hope this situation in certain parts of the world will not discourage or disengage those regions and countries where access and availability to controlled substances, such as opioids, are lacking to take the necessary steps. We believe the three drug conventions, the operational recommendations of the UNGASS outcome document, and the technical expertise available within WHO, UNODC, INCB but also in many member states, provide necessary and adequate tools to implement a balanced policy that prevents the non-medical use of these substances.

In this regard, we were very pleased to see the broad interest and open exchange of information on this issue during last year intersessionals of this Commission.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To summarize : we strongly believe all tools are available to provide an adequate access to, and availability of, quality-assured controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes. It is up to us to make efficient use of them in order to protect and help our citizens in need. We strongly hope we will continue to address this problem with the highest priority in several fora in the coming years in order to fulfill the objectives and goals we have all agreed to. Thank you.