



Press Release

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Health Advocates Demand Action to Curb Epidemic of Drug Overdose Deaths in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Vilnius, August 31 – As hundreds of groups mark 31 August as International Overdose Awareness Day, health advocates in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are calling on governments, medical providers, and donor agencies to take urgent action to control an epidemic of drug overdose deaths in the region. The scale of the problem is starkly described in a new report released today by the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN), which also suggests key steps needed to tackle overdose.

The scope of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and its relationship to injection drug use, is well known. Much less attention has been paid to death from overdose from heroin and other opiates, despite its huge impact among the region's more than 2 million drug users.

Official statistics from Russia show at least 7,500 overdose deaths in 2006 and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction estimates overdose to be one of the leading causes of death among young people in the European Region. "Overdose is a serious problem in our country," said Anya Sarang, Program Director at the Russian Harm Reduction Network in Moscow. "It doesn't have to be that way. We keep losing our friends and loved ones to overdose even though there effective measures for preventing these deaths."

Health advocates note that a number of complimentary measures are needed to stop the overdose epidemic. Distribution of Nalaxone a safe, highly effective overdose antidote listed on the World Health Organization's Model List of Essential can prevent overdose related death. In a US study distribution of nalaxone reduced overdose mortality by 30% within 3 years. In many countries, the number overdose deaths plummeted following the introduction of methadone or buprenorphine, two medications used to treat heroin addiction.

Innovative overdose prevention programs have begun work in several countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia recently. In Russia and Tajikistan, several organizations provide education about overdose, first aid training, and distribute free doses of naloxone. "This project is saving lives," said Dr. Rustam Minnebaev, who works with drug users in Naberezhnye Chelny, Russia. "Even in the short time we have been working we have had many reports of our clients successfully using naloxone to reverse overdoses." Similar programs will soon be launched by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine.

Leading researchers and health officials also note that much needs to be done to improve overdose statistics. "Unfortunately, no country in the region is collecting reliable data on overdose mortality. There's plenty of evidence suggesting that

overdose is killing thousands of people, but without good data it's difficult to address the problem or target programs appropriately" said Martin Donoghoe of the World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe. The lack of data inhibits advocacy for policy change and appropriate program planning. Valentin Simionov of the Romanian Harm Reduction Network noted, "Even though addressing overdose has been highlighted as a priority for the European Union, no action has been taken yet in Romania. The issue is so neglected that we don't even have enough data to argue for change."

"In 2008, no one should be dying from a heroin overdose," said EHRN Executive Director Raminta Stuikyte. "With better access to education, drug treatment, and medications like naloxone, we can stop this. It's about recognizing drug users as valued human beings, and working with them to help them protect themselves."

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