



## NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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### SUBSTANCE USE AMONG OLDER ADULTS: A NEGLECTED PROBLEM

#### Drug problems have no age limits, says EMCDDA

(3.4.2008, LISBON) 'Substance use is generally associated with young people, but such problems have no age limits', says the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)**. In the latest edition of its ***Drugs in focus*** series out today, entitled '**Substance use among older adults: a neglected problem**', it says: 'forecasts for the coming years are troubling'.

Europe is experiencing a pronounced ageing of its population, over a quarter of which will be aged 65 or over by 2028. According to the briefing: 'The number of older people with substance use problems, or requiring treatment for a substance use disorder, is estimated to more than double between 2001 and 2020'.

Illicit drug use among older adults may be less common than among young people, but its prevalence is rising, says the paper. In Europe, between 2002 and 2005, the proportion of patients aged 40 or over in treatment for opiate problems more than doubled (from 8.6% to 17.6%). And estimates from the US suggest that the number of over-50s needing treatment for drug problems could rise by up to 300% between 2001 and 2020.

**EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Götz** says: 'The increasing number of older adults with substance use problems will place new and greater demands on treatment services. Programmes that are accustomed to dealing mainly with young populations will need to adapt to meet the needs of this older group'.

Ageing may lead to a number of problems that can put a person at risk of substance misuse, says the paper. These include: social problems (financial worries); psychological problems (depression) and physical problems (painful medical conditions).

Concerns outlined in the briefing include the problem use by older adults of prescribed or over-the-counter medicines, which may be 'intentional or unintentional' and may vary in severity. The over-65s consume around one third of all prescribed drugs in Europe, often benzodiazepines and opiate-based painkillers. Older women are at a higher risk of prescription drug misuse than other groups, yet their problems often go undetected.

Figures show that older adults also have a relatively high risk of experiencing drinking problems. In Europe, 27% of those aged 55 or over declare consuming alcohol on a daily basis. Combined use of alcohol and other drugs can cause problems among older persons (accidents, injuries), even when drinking is light or moderate.

Many older substance-using adults have regular contact with medical services due to their health problems, yet healthcare professionals often miss or misdiagnose substance use disorders in this group due to lack of training or unsatisfactory diagnostic criteria. Improved screening procedures could be introduced to detect substance use in this group, specifically the misuse of medication (e.g. repeat/multiple prescriptions; tolerance).

'The realities of demographic change and the increasing service needs of ageing drug users are placing a financial strain on existing resources', says the paper: 'Inaction itself incurs costs and may even lead to greater costs because of subsequent crises. Overall expenditure for this older age group may be reduced by providing timely, effective interventions in appropriate settings'.

***Drugs in focus***, available in 25 languages at: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/drugs-in-focus>