Summary

Developments in drug law and policies

Hallucinogenic mushrooms on Schedule II of the Opium Act
The Minister of Health decided to add all hallucinogenic mushrooms to Schedule II of the Opium Act (as of the 1st of December 2008). Research shows that the annual government expenses on Opium Act crime increased with 67% compared to the year 2000. As a percentage of the total government expenses on crime, the expenses on Opium Act crime slightly increased from 8% in 2006 to 10% in 2007.

Parliamentary Debate
During a parliamentary debate in March 2008, the Ministers of Health, Justice and Home Affairs announced that the Dutch drug policy of the past thirty years will be evaluated. By the end of 2009, the Dutch government will launch a new comprehensive drug policy document. A new comparative risk assessment of drugs of potential misuse will be performed. Moreover, a separate risk assessment of cannabis will be made.

Developments in drug use and related problems

Overall decreasing trend in drug use among pupils since 1996
There are no new data on drug use in the general population. Between 2001 and 2005, the percentage of last year drug users remained stable among the general population of 15-64 years. However, among pupils of secondary schools (12-18 years) an overall decreasing trend in drug use is observed since 1996, although differences between 2003 and 2007 were generally not significant. Cannabis remained the most popular illegal drug with a last month prevalence of 8%. Last month prevalence rates for other drugs were below 1%.

Slight increase hospital admissions for cocaine and cannabis
Preliminary figures from addiction treatment suggest that, in absolute terms, the increase in the number of cannabis clients and amphetamine clients has continued in 2007, although the proportion of amphetamine clients of all drug clients remains small. For opiates, a minor increase is seen after some years of a decrease, which is probably due to improved registration of cases. However, these trends still need to be confirmed (see § 4.2). In 2007 general hospitals report a slight increase in the number of admission related to cocaine and cannabis abuse/dependence as secondary diagnoses (607 for cocaine and 399 for cannabis), but these disorders are not often recorded as primary diagnoses (114 for cocaine and 69 for cannabis). The increase until 2006 in the number of acute emergencies related to cannabis and GHB in Amsterdam did not continue in 2007 (444 and 110 in 2007, respectively). The number of emergencies related to hallucinogenic mushrooms further increased, from 125 in 2006 to 149 in 2007. As Amsterdam has a high load of young drug tourists in Amsterdam, who often experiment with drugs, these trends can not be generalised to the Netherlands as a whole.

Decreasing mortality
National data from Causes of Deaths Statistics indicate that drug overdose mortality has remained low since the mid-nineties, and decreased in the past years (99 cases in 2007). With some fluctuations, the number of acute deaths related specifically to opiates show a similar declining trend (34 cases in 2007). Data for Amsterdam also point at a decreasing
mortality rate among methadone clients, in spite of the progressive ageing and pathology in this group. Probably, the majority of the (ultra) high risk group of injecting drug users has died already, and mortality rates may drop to the level of non-injecting drug users.

Low number of new infections of HIV and hepatitis
The number of exchanged syringes in Rotterdam and Amsterdam continued to decline in 2007 (180,100 and 210,000, respectively) suggesting a further decreasing popularity of drug injecting. However, while a cohort study among young hard drug users (18-30 years) confirmed a low incidence of injecting in this group, relapse among those who had ever injected before was common (2 against 13 per 100 person-years).

Data from various sources on infectious diseases suggest that the number of new diagnoses of HIV and hepatitis B and C among hard drug users is low, but there are many indications that the number of chronically infected drug users, and thereby the burden of these diseases is much higher.

Increase in price of Dutch marihuana
Market data show that the average THC concentration in Dutch home-grown marihuana bought in coffee shops in 2008 remained at the level measured in 2007 (16%). The percentage of THC in imported hashish dropped from 18.7% in 2006 to 13.3% in 2007, and partially recovered in 2008 (16.2%). The increase from 2006 to 2007 in the price of Dutch marihuana at user level continued in 2008 (6.2, 7.3 and 7.7 euro, respectively), which may be related to the intensified actions of police and justice to combat large-scale cannabis cultivation.

Developments in prevention and treatment

Emphasis on vulnerable groups
Drug prevention in the Netherlands is part of the broader domain of health prevention. In the last four-year policy plan, the main focus is on alcohol abuse among young people. Currently, prevention of drug use is focused on vulnerable or at-risk groups, not only younger people but also the elderly, patients with mental retardation, several other client groups in mental health care and people in prison. The growing emphasis on risk groups is reflected in (pilot) studies that evaluate interventions for heavier alcohol and drug using students. Examples of these interventions are brief face-to-face motivational interviews combined with incentives to increase participation and response, in-school office hours for drug problems and the start of a school-based outpatient clinic. New is also a private course for parents at home, training them in recognising and correcting drug use behaviour of their children. Two projects (the Parent Management Training Oregon and the Coping Power Programme) are specifically targeting the reduction of problem behaviours at an early age because these appear to be strongly related to substance abuse and criminality at a later age. A national office hour on party drugs is initiated for complaints about these drugs via a national phone number. The popularity and number of prevention and treatment programs via the internet is increasing. New are a website on drug use and infectious diseases and one on integrated treatment for dual diagnosis or comorbidity.

More treatment interventions for young people
Treatment of drug use problems is also increasingly focussing on young people. All organisations of addiction care and juvenile justice institutions now have specific treatment facilities for this target group, or are currently developing these. In line with earlier studies, the results of a recent systematic review showed that, of the available evidence for effectiveness of interventions for young people who use drugs, the evidence is strongest