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 SISTEMA NAZIONALE DI ALLERTA PRECOCE E RISPOSTA RAPIDA PER LE DROGHE
N.E.W.S. NATIONAL EARLY WARNING SYSTEM - EMCDDA ITALIAN FOCAL POINT 
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DRUGS @ INTERNET: ITALIAN NATIONAL EARLY WARNING SYSTEM (N.E.W.S.) AS A WINDOW FOR MONITORING DRUG TRAFFICKING AND MARKETING ON THE WEB

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The 5th Italian National Conference on Drugs

From 12th to 14th March 2009 the city of Trieste, in Italy, hosted the 5th National Conference on issues related to drugs and drugs circulation. The event, provided for by the Italian law about drugs, was presided by the Undersecretary of State, Senator Carlo Giovanardi, and managed by the Department for Antidrug Policies, Presidency of the Council of Ministers. The Conference was a moment for meetings and comparisons among governmental institutions and people working in the field of drug abuse, coming from both public and private sector and committed to the everyday action of prevention and contrast of addiction.

Among the several issues dealt with during the Conference, wide space was dedicated to the Italian National Early Warning System – N.E.W.S. The System is an operative unit of the Department for Antidrug Policies, and its technical-scientific direction is

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up do Dr. Teodora Macchia, from the Italian Istituto Superiore di Sanità, the leading technical and scientific public body of the Italian National Health Service. At the international level, the System interfaces the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) through the Italian National Focal Point, whose Head is Dr. Elisabetta Simeoni, Scientific Area Director of the Department for Antidrug Policies.

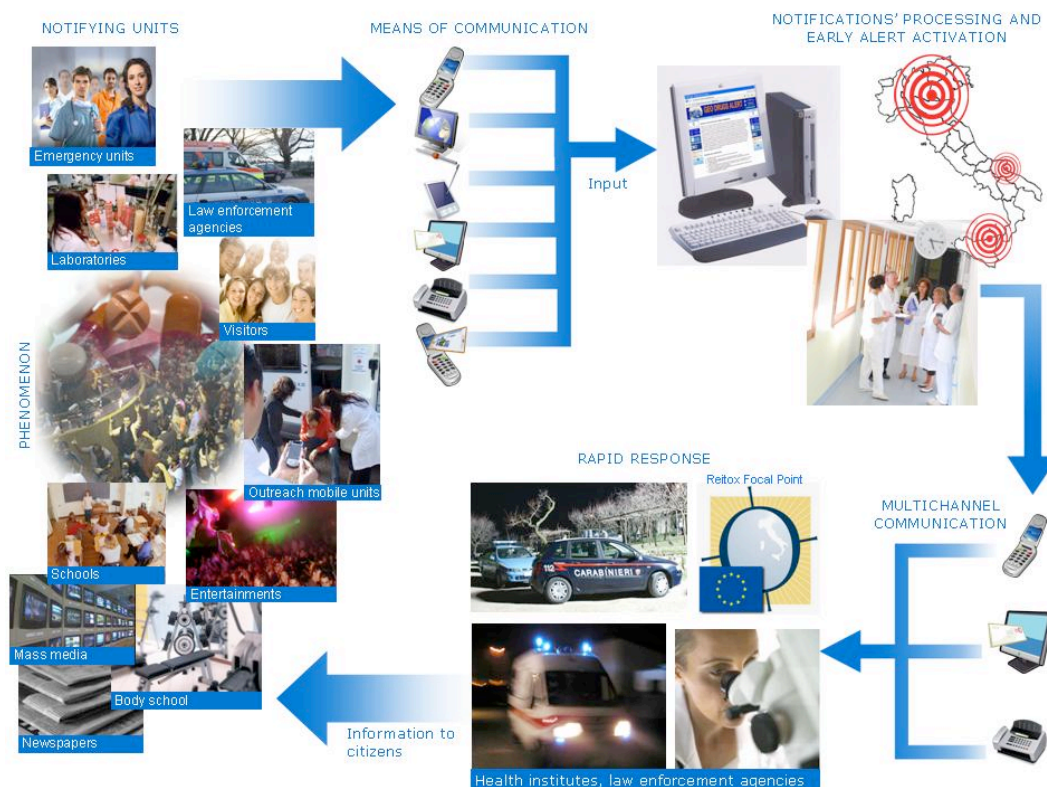
National Early Warning System (N.E.W.S.): origin and goals

The N.E.W.S. rose from the observation that the system for trafficking and marketing illicit substances is offering a growing number of new products. Those products more and more often cause serious harms to consumers' physical and psychic health. Those same harms have different expressions, they can manifest themselves in several ways but, above all, they can manifest themselves in different times, short-medium-long run, with severities varying from the instant death of the consumer up to chronic deficits of important intellectual functions.

According to the European Council Decision 2005/387/JHA, the National Early Warning System is meant to precociously identify potentially dangerous phenomena correlated to the appearance of new substances or new patterns of consumption on the whole Italian territory. The System is also meant to quickly activate a concrete and rapid response among governmental institutions and operative units dedicated to the defence and the protection of public health (<http://alert.dronet.org/>). Information about observed phenomena (notifications) comes from operative units composing the N.E.W.S. input network: emergency rooms, laboratories, institutions for caring addicts, outreach mobile units, communities, law enforcement agencies, school, media, places for entertainment and consumers as well. Notifications are timely managed, in order to reduce at minimum the time between the first notification and the moment when the possible alert is sent.

The software “Geo Drugs Alert”

The management of notifications and alerts is supported by the software 2.0 “Geo Drugs Alert”, a brand-spanking new and last generation software. It includes systems for geo-locating input notifications, and it is connected to advanced systems for managing output alert notifications. That is possible thanks to the use of integrated forms of contemporaneous transmission of messages (via mail, fax, sms), able to reach every kind of operative unit, also the less equipped ones or those without Internet connection, as well as every single person traceable by means of a simple mobile phone (www.allertadroga.it) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - National Early Warning System (N.E.W.S.): functional model.

Drugs on the Internet: some data

One of the environment the N.E.W.S. is now keeping under control is the Internet. The Web has been representing a more and more walked way for drug trafficking and marketing for long. However, there are evidences affirming this tendency has recently increased. For instance, in the last six months, accesses to websites dedicated to drugs selling have had an increase of 40% (UNODC, 2009). This datum results particularly worrying if we consider that young Italians, 12-20 years old, spend about 39 hours per month surfing on the Web (Bricolo F., Serpelloni G., 2007).

At the 5th National Conference on Drugs, the N.E.W.S. pointed out that three are the main aspects to take into account when speaking about drugs on the Internet. The first aspect is represented by the increased number of online pharmacies selling medicines without any medical prescription (82%). Among their products, online pharmacies offer benzodiazepines (84%) and opiates (68%) (INCB, 2007), and they also provide online consultancies by way of "cyberdoctors" advising people about best medical treatments.

The second aspect is about the increasing number of online shops selling both alternative psychoactive and controlled substances (LSD, ecstasy, cannabis). The alert has already been risen by the EMCDDA: the European Centre highlighted the sale of more than 200 psychoactive products on several European websites that, besides marketing substances of every kind, also sell tools for the cultivation of vegetal products and paraphernalia for increasing the effects of consumed vegetal substances. Most of the online shops concentrates in the United Kingdom (52%) and to a lesser extent in Holland (37%) and Germany (6%) (OEDT, 2008). The purchase of products is easy and it works like most of the purchases one can do on the Internet: select the product you want, give the address where you want it to be delivered, pay by credit card and you get your selected item in a few days.

Illicit drug marketing seems to be facilitated by a system of courier services not enforcing proper nor accurate controls on the delivered packages. For instance, on 1.553

boxes imported in the U.S.A. containing medicinal products, the 88% was actually wrapping illegal products, especially cannabis and magic mushrooms (INCB, 2007).

In the end, forums, blogs, chat rooms, social networks (i.e. www.webehigh.com) represent virtual spaces where users exchange information about the way to best consume some products, where to buy “good staff”, how much to pay it, which new products are available on the Web, etc.

Purchasing drugs on the Web: an ad hoc survey

An ad hoc survey carried out by the N.E.W.S. explored the Web in order to see what the Internet may offer to those trying to purchase illicit substances. One of the most common search engine, “Google”, was used. Typing the words “buy+party+pills” 320.000 websites where it was possible to purchase party pills came up. Every website was characterized by very attractive images, beaming messages of fun and euphoria associated to the consumption of the offered product. For “buy+cocaine” Google found 1.100.000 websites where it was possible to get information about where to buy good quality cocaine at cheap price on the Web. For “buy+ecstasy” 4.420.000 websites were detected: there, much information about where to buy ecstasy pills avoiding law enforcement agencies’ controls were clearly available. Moreover, the identified websites reported testimonies of people who already consumed the product and presented special offers to purchase ecstasy pills at convenient prices. Finally, more than 1 million were the detected websites where it was possible to buy marijuana seeds and to read advices about the best way to grow and consume them by means of paraphernalia of every kind.

In general, it can be affirmed that creators of websites dedicated to drug trafficking and marketing use real marketing policies and techniques in order to better recommend their own products and to enhance their purchase among Internet surfers, attracting their curiosity and tempting them by praising the good quality of the product, its cheap price, the good sensations and the pleasant effects felt after its consumption.

Monitoring the Web at international level

The Department for Antidrug Policies has already expressed a serious concern about the faster and faster displacement of illicit drug market from traditional forms to new ones, like the e-commerce. In a virtual, fast, changeable and hardly locatable environment like the Internet, the overall number of purchases and of exchanged information on new drugs and new patterns of consumption tries out national antidrug policies and control mechanisms at both national and international level. Thanks to a strict collaboration with specialized law enforcement agencies, to the availability of high technologies, like the software “Geo Drugs Alert”, and to a creative synergy with international research centres, the National Early Warning System is now able to monitor the Internet and to collect information from the Web in a systematized way. According to that, an important role is played by the collaboration with the “Psychonaut research project”, aimed at developing a web scanning system to identify and categorise novel psychoactive compounds and new trends in drug use based on information available on the Internet.

The need to identify global trends about drug trafficking and marketing has led the Addiction Department for Antidrug Policies to recommend new macro-indicators for drugs supply reduction to international organizations. Although their definition is not definitive yet, Italy has suggested to include the number of new websites offering psychoactive substances and/or licit new psychotropic substances with no medical purpose as new reduction supply indicators. That is a way to contribute to the definition of more updated national and

international policies, also in accordance to INCB Guidelines on preventing the illegal sale of internationally controlled substances through the Internet.

Increasing the efforts to detect drug trafficking and marketing on the Internet, improving regulations and laws, cooperating with foreign countries and monitoring the Web through the N.E.W.S. are some of the necessary steps Italy is taking to strengthen joint and complementary regulatory measures and to face and countervail the phenomenon of drugs sold on the Internet, within and outside national boundaries.

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