

SUMMARY RECORD (PARTIAL)* / OF THE SEVEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-SEVENTH MEETING

held on Wednesday, 27 February 1974, at 2.35 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. KIEKA Turkey

Mr. Castro y Castro (Mexico), second Vice-President, took the Chair.

POPPY CULTIVATION UNDER PROPERLY CONTROLLED CONDITIONS SO AS TO MEET THE WORLD'S REQUIREMENTS OF OPIUM FOR MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC PURPOSES (agenda item 9) (continued) (E/INCB/21 and Corr.1)

Mr. SAMSOM (Observer for the Netherlands), speaking at the invitation of the Chairman, said that he greatly appreciated the concise and clear language of the report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 1973 (E/INCB/21 and Corr.1) and wished to associate himself with other delegations which had paid a tribute to the outstanding qualities of the outgoing President, Sir Harry Greenfield, and his colleagues.

He agreed with many earlier speakers - particularly the representatives of the United States of America, India, the United Kingdom and Iran - who had suggested (766th meeting) that the cultivation of the poppy for medical and scientific purposes should be studied further with a view to developing a long-term policy and he proposed that the matter should be included among the priority items for the Commission's twenty-sixth session. Like the representative of the United Kingdom, he considered that the Board had a crucial role to play in that sphere. It might for instance extrapolate the figures contained in its 1973 report in order to establish detailed estimates of morphine production over the next three to five years.

In view of the comments made by the representatives of India and Iran concerning the marginal profitability of poppy cultivation for opium production, he suggested that the Commission and the Board should include the question of world opium prices among the subjects to be covered in the establishment of long-term and medium-term policy programmes. In the meantime, the only way of alleviating the problem of world opium supplies was to make better use of existing resources. The representative of India had demonstrated the disadvantages of using unincised poppy straw, as advocated by the representative of the United States of America. It would be preferable to consider the increased processing of incised poppy straw, a residual product of opium production, which would be a low-risk method of meeting the growing demand for codeine. The technology was already available and there would be no need to increase the acreage of poppy cultivation. He hoped that the Commission's discussions would result in some progress in the solution of that problem.

Mr. LOGARAS (Observer for Greece), speaking at the invitation of the Chairman, associated himself with the representative of the Netherlands in thanking the outgoing President of INCB and his colleagues for the remarkable work they had done. He reminded the Commission that Greece had been among the opium-producing countries in accordance with the provisions of article 6 (International trade in opium) of the 1953 Protocol but had decided, in January 1973, to prohibit the cultivation of the opium poppy. The Greek Narcotics Committee was very often obliged to curtail by 20 - 40 per cent the quantities of opium supplied to manufacturers of cough mixtures and analgesic compounds. Yet the demand for codeine was increasing, since Greek doctors preferred to use codeine rather than synthetic derivatives, which were less effective. That situation should not cause any concern to the United Nations, since codeine had never been used in Greece for the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs.

* / No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

Greece shared the hopes of other countries that the research on Papaver bracteatum would be successful in the near future and would solve the problem of codeine requirements for therapeutic purposes. Nevertheless, he did not share the optimism of certain delegations regarding the possibility of developing strong analgesic drugs which did not lead to drug dependence.

Mr. DOBRESCU (Romania) said that Romanian doctors rarely used morphine as an analgesic, since there were many other products with the same qualities, but they preferred codeine to other cough medicines, because it was more effective. Research was now being carried out to discover new substances with comparable effectiveness but it had not yet been possible to establish the relationship between the chemical structure of substances and their qualities in the relief of coughing, and it might take several years before that research produced any results. Consequently, he agreed with delegations which believed that it was necessary to deal at once with the practical aspects of the problem, with a view to finding intermediate solutions.

Romania was able to meet half of its domestic requirements for codeine from poppy straw produced from its crops of Papaver somniferum. The remainder of its requirements were met by imports of pure codeine. The method proposed by the representative of the United States of America was interesting, but the objections raised by the representative of India should be considered very carefully. In the immediate future, Romania was intending to start the cultivation of Papaver bracteatum and to co-operate with all States that had opted for that solution.

Dr. ELLINGTON (Jamaica) said that efforts to control the illicit traffic had had some adverse effects on the supply of codeine for medical and scientific purposes. There was a need for morphine and even more for codeine, and at present no synthetic substitutes were available. The problem was therefore to determine which of the various proposals put forward was most likely to make good the present shortage of codeine.

The plan to intensify research to develop new varieties of Papaver somniferum with a higher morphine or opium content was not likely to be successful in the immediate future. The use of thebaine as a raw material, although perfectly feasible on a laboratory scale, had not yet reached the stage of commercial exploitation. The representative of the United States of America, for his part, had suggested that the present acreage now under poppy cultivation should be used more efficiently.

The representative of Czechoslovakia had stated (766th meeting) that control measures were normally applied in the manufacture of morphine from poppy straw, among which were the improved extraction techniques and the use of incised rather than unincised material. The treatment of poppy straw appeared to be the most likely way of providing the codeine that was so badly needed. However, that method required further examination, as the representative of the United States and the Chief of the United Nations Laboratory (766th meeting) had admitted. His delegation believed that the ideas expressed by the United States representative on the subject deserved serious attention.

Mr. VAILLE (France) said that the Board's report for 1973 represented a good starting point for solving the various problems, which could be considered from two aspects: demand and supply. With regard to demand, world consumption of codeine and pholcodine was still increasing steadily. In France, although the consumption of codeine and ethylmorphine had levelled off in the past four years, demand for pholcodine was still increasing. It was important to remember, however, that the posology used for cough medicines varied considerably from country to country, depending on the qualities that were demanded of them. For example, the amounts of

codeine used in France in tablets were only a third of the amounts used in the United States of America and the injectable form of codeine was no longer used in therapy because of the risk of dependence inherent in that method. Moreover, some pharmacologists considered that codeine was not essential, since it treated the symptoms rather than the cause of a particular condition. The synthetics so far developed did not have the same antitussive effect on the human system as codeine.

With regard to supply, it was clear that opium production had not been sufficient to maintain stocks in 1973, that poppy straw was playing a more important part than in the past and that synthetics still left something to be desired. It was difficult to make any forecasts for the future; the Indian Government should be authorized to expand its opium production, on the understanding that leakages to the illicit traffic would be excluded. At the same time, the Board should supply India with all the necessary information on the world situation, both to ensure that it did not produce opium in amounts that were contrary to its own interests and those of the world community, and also to enable it to comply with the provisions of article 24 (Limitation on production of opium for international trade), paragraph 1, of the 1961 Convention.

With regard to the advantages and drawbacks of the various procedures suggested for meeting world needs, he said that the production of straw from Papaver somniferum (ripe poppy capsules) gave a high yield (1.2 kg of morphine per hectare) and did not require a great deal of agricultural equipment, which meant that that method was profitable for the grower. With regard to straw from the green poppy, research undertaken in France had confirmed that one hectare of green poppy straw yielded almost as much morphine as a hectare of opium poppy straw - from 2 to 3 kg. Also, weather hazards could be avoided and the cultivated areas reduced; and, lastly, industrial harvesting took place at a time when it was already possible to begin the incision of the capsules, so that leakages to the illicit traffic were ruled out. However, in processing the product, sizeable industrial installations were required for stabilization and drying, and the costs of the method were therefore comparable with those for the extraction of alkaloids. With regard to Papaver bracteatum, on which there was still only limited information, there were grounds for hoping that the yield would be 10 to 30 kg of thebaine per hectare. Cultivation of Papaver bracteatum would reduce the risk of illicit traffic, since morphine was not involved and the plants were productive only after 2 to 3 years. In the long term, that variety of poppy appeared to offer a sound and economic solution.

There were some obstacles to the industrial manufacture of synthetics. In the first place, synthetics were not particularly profitable; and secondly, as a result of action taken by WHO extensive testing was required before authorization to launch a new product on the market was granted. Research prospects were probably best in the universities, which should be encouraged by WHO to continue their research with a view to discovering antitussives capable of competing with codeine. The United Nations Laboratory might continue the research, begun in Hungary a few years previously, on the varieties of poppy from which codeine could be extracted.

France was against the idea of encouraging new countries to produce opium, because of the difficulties involved in exercising effective control. As the President of INCB and the representative of the United States of America had pointed out (766th meeting), it was practically impossible to control leakages in cases where the geographical situation of the poppy growing countries offered ample opportunities for them. Furthermore, it was unnecessary for the Secretariat to undertake new research on Papaver somniferum straw, in view of the results of several decades of experience given in the INCB publication Statistics on Narcotic Drugs for 1972 furnished by Governments in accordance with the international treaties and maximum

levels of opium stocks 17/ and taking into account the fact that both manufacturing methods and yields varied from country to country. The possibilities for improvement in that area seemed to be limited.

In conclusion, he considered that the situation with regard to world supplies of opium for medical purposes should not cause undue alarm, but that long-term studies should be undertaken to adjust supply to demand.

Mr. MOTOHASHI (Japan) said that, although some experts believed that all opiates could be replaced by synthetic drugs, medical practitioners were still demanding considerable quantities of opiates. In Japan, opium production was declining from year to year and the amount produced for medical use was negligible. For medical and scientific purposes, therefore, Japan depended almost entirely on imports and was experiencing considerable difficulty in obtaining supplies.

99 per cent of the opiates used in medicine were used in the form of codeine phosphate and hydrocodone phosphate for the relief of coughing, while the remainder was used in the form of morphine for the relief of pain. The shortage of opium was so serious in Japan that the Government was attempting to develop synthetic substances and techniques for extracting opium from poppy straw, and it was also promoting an incentive system for poppy cultivators. In view of the medical situation in Japan, there were no grounds for hoping either that demand would decline or that it could be met entirely by domestic production. Japan would therefore have to continue to import opium from abroad.

His delegation felt that the cultivation of the poppy under properly controlled conditions should be continued, in order to meet world requirements of opium for medical and scientific purposes. Also, research on methods of improving the yield and the quality of opium - and on poppy straw opium extraction techniques - should be encouraged. Similar encouragement should be given to research on synthetic drugs and on Papaver bracteatum.

Mr. KIRCA (Turkey) said that the discussion had thrown light on two key points. First, all delegations were agreed that the supply of opium might be insufficient to meet world medical and scientific requirements but there was some difference of opinion as to the extent of the shortfall and the urgency of the position. Secondly, there was no agreement concerning the methods to be used for solving the problem.

His delegation believed that in the search for solutions it was essential to bear constantly in mind the provisions of the relevant international treaties. The solutions to be applied should be in line with the provisions of those treaties which determined the rights and obligations of States parties. In particular, there was no provision in the 1961 Convention which could be invoked as a legal basis for granting a de facto monopoly or semi-monopoly to one country singled out as the only country qualified to supply all or most of the world with opium.

That solution would be tantamount to asking other States parties to the Convention to undertake - virtually for ever - to refrain from cultivating the opium poppy, though no such undertaking was included in any of the legal instruments at present in force. A State was entitled to permit the cultivation of the opium poppy on its territory, in accordance with the conditions laid down in the Convention, and it was also entitled to prohibit cultivation. The decision rested with it, and with it alone.

Consequently, States should remember that any measures they might advocate over and above the obligations arising from the existing conventions would have the force only of mere suggestions. If they lost sight of that elementary truth, they might find themselves embarking on a hazardous course and might be exposed to misunderstandings and friction. In the opinion of his Government, consideration should be given to every possible measure which was licit and in conformity with the 1961 Convention and would provide a genuine solution to the problem of the opium shortage.

Mr. EYRIES VALMASEDA (Observer for Spain), speaking at the invitation of the Chairman, said that as supplies - particularly of codeine and other products frequently used in medicine - were inadequate to meet existing requirements, measures should be considered for increasing production and at the same time ensuring effective control over crops.

In his view, it was essential to achieve a balance between the use of the opium poppy and poppy straw for the extraction of substances used in medicine. Control of poppy straw was much easier. Consequently, more use should be made of poppy straw and possibly of other plant species.

He agreed with the recommendation contained at the end of paragraph 43 of the assessment appended to the report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 1973 under the heading "The supply of opium for licit manufacture", to the effect that "it would seem prudent to examine the future planning of normal resources of raw materials, with a view to providing not only for meeting those requirements but also for rebuilding stocks". In that way, the situation in the international market could be regularized. A study should also be made of the possibilities offered by other sources.

Mr. OLIVIERI (Argentina) said his delegation considered that improvement of controls and technology were the key factors. In that respect, its position was identical with the views expressed by the President of INCB and the representative of the United States of America.

The decisions to be taken should not interfere with the measures hitherto applied and should not impair the results they had achieved. The President of INCB had rightly stressed the need to keep the problem within reasonable bounds.

The representative of Switzerland, for his part, had drawn attention (766th meeting) to one point of capital importance, namely, the existing relationship - from the point of view of the Board's responsibilities - between the control exercised in pursuance of the conventions in force and the obligation, also expressed in those instruments to meet licit requirements. At the same time, as the Board indicated in paragraph 42 of the assessment appended to its report for 1973, many factors which could affect future prospects were not yet accurately predictable.

His delegation advocated research on Papaver somniferum and Papaver bracteatum, and thought that the United Nations Laboratory should be asked to undertake studies on morphine and poppy straw.

His Government also considered that measures should be taken to rebuild opium stocks, and he agreed with the representative of the United States of America that the question of opium supplies should remain under constant attention.

Dr. JOHNSON-ROMUALD (Togo) noted that the members of the Commission were agreed that the demand for opium for licit purposes exceeded available supplies. Governments had applied the control measures conscientiously, and it now appeared that opium poppy cultivation was insufficient to meet world requirements of opium for medical and scientific purposes. Nevertheless, as the President of INCB had stressed, the situation was not alarming; what was required merely was to find a remedy. The international community had a collective responsibility in the matter and, in his view, the Commission should meet annually, even if only for short sessions, to keep a close watch on the application of the strategy decided upon. Annual sessions were fully justified in view of the magnitude of the problem.

India, as an opium-exporting country, had a very heavy responsibility. In the search for a solution, the international community had many factors operating in its favour. One was that India was well aware of its responsibilities. As its representative had stressed at the 766th meeting, the problem had many facets - legal, agronomic, economic, sociological and climatic - which meant that India could not increase its production ad infinitum. It had also been pointed out that poppy straw could substantially increase the supply of alkaloids.

Lastly, it should be borne in mind that the key problem was the possibility of diversions to the illicit market. As the Governments of countries other than India were not sufficiently sure of the effectiveness of their controls, it was impossible to envisage the cultivation of the opium poppy elsewhere. Research was in progress on Papaver bracteatum, but could not bear fruit for several years.

The delegations of Iran and Yugoslavia had raised the question (766th meeting) of the price of opium, which was a factor of considerable importance. The representative of India had said that the various costs which his Government had to pay left a relatively slim profit margin, and the representative of Iran had advocated an objective review of the price of opium. Cultivation of the opium poppy under properly controlled conditions was a valuable service to the international community, but it should be properly remunerated. Moreover, there was always a risk that production might be diverted to the illicit market if traffickers offered a higher price. If the grower obtained a fair profit from his harvest, he would no longer be interested in selling to traffickers.

It had been stated that an increase in the price of opium might operate to the advantage of synthetic products. The representative of France had indicated the limits of that risk. Industrialists hesitated to manufacture synthetic products, because they were not commercially viable and their manufacture was subject to various administrative and medical controls.

The French delegation had nevertheless said it was opposed to an increase in opium poppy cultivation, and that such a measure would be a step backwards rather than forwards. The Togolese delegation also took that view.

In conclusion, he said that the statements by the representatives of India and the United States of America, as well as the pertinent paragraphs in the Board's report for 1973 and the positive contributions made by various delegations during the discussion would enable the Commission to obtain a clear picture of the problem and to apply a rational strategy for its solution.

Mr. SVIRIDOV (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) said that he would not refer again to the Soviet Union's position on opium production and the problem of substitutes for codeine, since its views on those matters had already been stated at earlier meetings. He wished merely to repeat that measures were being taken in the Soviet Union for the gradual replacement of the opium poppy by poppy straw in morphine production. Production of poppy straw was strictly and efficiently controlled, as was indicated in paragraph 28 of the Board's report for 1973.

His delegation was aware of the difficulties - referred to by several delegations - which might face a vast country such as India if it were compelled to switch abruptly to the production of poppy straw. Nevertheless, as the Indian and other delegations had pointed out, the position should not be over-dramatized. The situation in all its aspects should be evaluated objectively, and no undue emphasis should be given to any one factor.

The representative of India had made several very sound proposals; he had stressed, inter alia, that the measures to be taken should be taken by producers and consumers alike. He agreed with the representatives of Togo and Yugoslavia that, in studying the problem as a whole, adequate attention should be given to measures for the repression of the illicit traffic.

The French and Turkish delegations had stressed the need to act prudently and cautiously. The United States of America had placed particular emphasis on the desirability of research in certain fields.

It seemed, then, that the Commission was determined to study the question as a whole and consider all its aspects. It should avoid any hasty decisions that might ignore certain aspects of the situation. He therefore agreed with the United States representative that, rather than adopt a resolution, the Commission should merely include in its report an account of the discussions on the item.

Mr. JASJIT SINGH (India) recalled that the representative of Iran had mentioned the question of the prices paid by manufacturers to producer countries and by the latter to growers, and had stressed that prices should be sufficiently remunerative. The representative of the Netherlands had suggested that the question of prices should be included in the agenda for the Commission's twenty-sixth session. The Indian delegation could not support that suggestion, mainly because price-fixing was the responsibility of Governments. The fixing of the prices to be paid to growers was a complex problem, first because prices had to be high enough to discourage growers from selling their production in the illicit market, and secondly, because they had to be low enough not to encourage growers to abandon altogether the cultivation of essential crops such as rice and wheat. Export prices were also fixed by Governments, and the most that the Commission could do was to make recommendations on the subject.

Since the representative of France had referred to the extraction of morphine from the green poppy, he wished to stress that, in his statement at the 766th meeting, he had not been referring to the green poppy but to poppy straw. The representatives of France and Togo had said they were convinced that India was able to control opium production within its frontiers, and he wished to state that the Indian Government would spare no effort to that end.

The discussions had focused attention on the two essential features of the problem, namely, the obligation to prevent drug abuse and the obligation to provide enough medicaments to relieve the physical suffering of mankind. It was the responsibility of Governments to comply with those two obligations as expressed in the 1961 Convention.

The representative of the United States of America had suggested that the Commission might dispense with the adoption of a formal resolution. The Indian delegation hoped that, if no resolution were adopted, it would still be possible to give effect to the suggestions that had been made concerning research, and that the United Nations Laboratory would take the necessary steps.

Mr. SAMSOM (Observer for the Netherlands), speaking at the invitation of the Chairman, wished to make it clear to the Indian representative that the Netherlands did not believe that the Commission should undertake a detailed study of the question of prices but simply that any medium-term or long-term programme that might be adopted to deal with future supplies should take account of the price factor. Price-fixing was, of course, the prerogative of Governments. He thought that a slight increase in prices - which would still be fixed by Governments - might alleviate the present problem.

The CHAIRMAN noted that it was clear from the discussions that the question of poppy cultivation under properly controlled conditions needed to be studied further. For that purpose, INCB should continue its analyses and submit reports, as it had done in the past. It would also be particularly helpful if the United Nations Laboratory could make some suggestions as to the areas in which research should be undertaken. The Division of Narcotic Drugs might well submit a report on the question at the Commission's twenty-sixth session.

The suggestions made during the present session should be taken into account in establishing the programme of work and priorities for the twenty-sixth session. The Commission would also have to decide to take note of the report of INCB for 1973 (E/INCB/21 and Corr.1) and the comments on it made by delegations.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 4.50 p.m.