

Usage of opium and its derivatives in pharmacotherapies in El Salvador

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Abstract

In the Central American region and particularly in El Salvador, many technical, legal and social difficulties have historically arisen for the usage of controlled drugs (narcotics, psychotropics and chemical precursors). So, for the population in general, the access to this type of medicine has been quite difficult. For this, a series of factors have greatly influenced, such as Legal Norms that are regularly quite restrictive and that generate fear in prescribing or using them by some health professionals, especially due to ignorance of it and fear of legal consequences for the poor prescription or misuse of medications by patients. Among other influencing factors, there are the low local or regional production of medicines that declare opium or its derivatives as active substances, social factors, such as discrimination against people who use this type of medicine or fear of the risks of addiction due to the wrong use of them.

Keywords: Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropics, Opium, Controlled, El Salvador

Introduction

The regulation of controlled products, including opium, dates back to 1909 with the establishment of the Shanghai Opium Commission (International Opium Convention, given in The Hague, on January 23, 1912). Since then, an impressive volume of international treaties has gradually accumulated. Historically since 1912 nine international instruments have been drawn up, approved, tested and successively modified and completed in the light of experience, which nowadays are included in the 1961 Convention.

Opium and its derivatives have been used since a long time ago at a popular level, and more recently since the 1960s.

Particularly with the establishment of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 (United Nations Conference's Resolutions, held in New York, from January 25 to March 24, 1961), and its amended protocol of 1972 (Final Act of the United Nations conference to consider amendments to the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, Geneva, March 25, 1972), regulations have been established which have allowed the control of the obtaining of substances derived from opium that produce relaxation or pleasure.

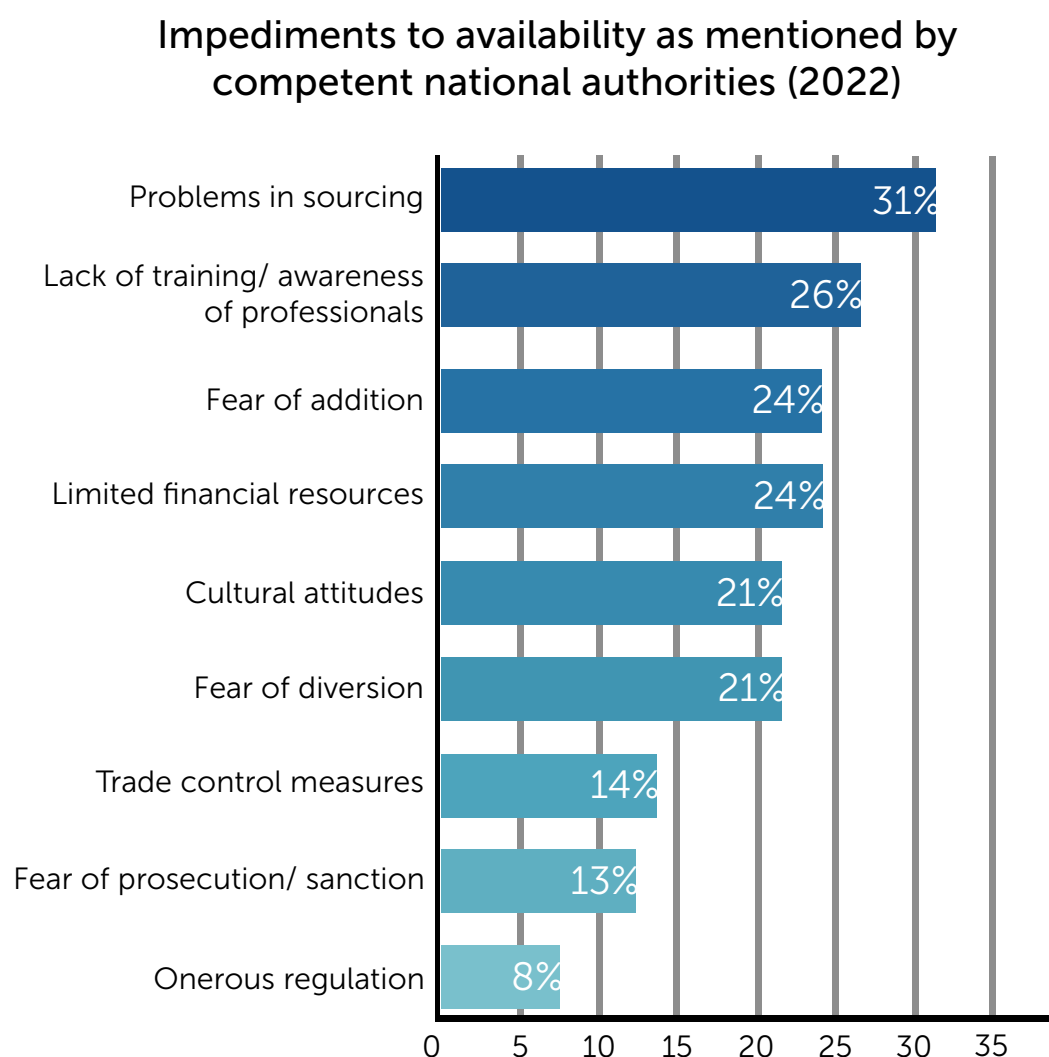
In this sense, substances such as heroin, morphine, methadone and oxycodone have been derived naturally or synthetically from opium, and through scientific research it has been possible to develop formulas that have been included in pharmaceutical preparations and in properly studied doses and established, for use in therapeutic treatments, such as, for example:

- Short-term treatments can relieve pain and make the person feel more relaxed, hence its importance in the treatment of patients who, due to serious health problems or the incidence of serious diseases such as cancer, require of the use of opium-derived medications for the treatment of pain, including Oxycodone and morphine. (National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; US Department of Health and Human Services) However, some studies carried out (NIDA,2021), have shown that the continued use of this type of drugs can also cause adverse effects that can restrict the normal activities of patients and these effects include:

- Lethargy
- Confusion
- Nausea
- Constipation
- Euphoria
- slow breathing

In El Salvador, as in the rest of the world, there are many registered medications that state controlled substances derived from opium; however, access and availability, as previously mentioned, continues to be a difficult situation. For this reason, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) carried out an international consultation and in its annual report for 2022 (United Nations: International Narcotics Control Board, March 2023), on the availability of controlled substances subject to international inspection, proposes some of the difficulties that mainly arise to guarantee adequate access to substances subject to international inspection for medical and scientific purposes, which are presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Comparative chart of main impediments reported by the countries and that influence the availability of medicines classified as narcotics.



Source: United Nations report through the International Narcotics Control Board, March 2023

From the above, it is important to highlight that the difficulties that arise in obtaining the substances are the situations that have the greatest impact on ensuring access to these drugs.

In particular, according to the INCB reports, the Central American region and El Salvador within the same region, in many cases, present difficulties due to limited stocks of these medications or due to imports in very small quantities.

Despite the difficulties presented for the access and availability of these drugs in the

region, it is important to highlight that in El Salvador, since 2020, efforts have increased to raise awareness among many doctors about the need to address pain treatments or in palliative care, with the use of narcotics such as methadone, oxycodone, morphine and pethidine. The above has allowed pain clinics to be implemented in the national health system, especially in the hospitals of the Ministry of Health and the Salvadoran Social Security Institute. As well as, even in the recent period of pandemic due to the Sars-Cov-2 virus, caring for patients through

home visits by specialized health personnel, allowing patients to follow their treatment regimens, and consequently, have the necessary medications for their treatment. It is also important to mention that, as a fundamental part to facilitate access to these drugs in El Salvador, there are fairly up-to-date internal norms, controls on the import, manufacturing, marketing, prescription and usage processes, which are quite safe and efficient. In the case of prescription, a modern online prescription service is available, which allows prescribing doctors and patients to obtain precise information on pharmaceutical establishments where they can find the drugs they require.

The process to obtain an import permit is quite agile; response times to these requests are short, around three business days. Even in cases where the drug is not available in the country, the regulatory authority supports patients so that they can import the medicine they require. The following table (Table 1) details the amount of raw materials and products related to opium that were imported in the last three years and that have allowed the population to have safe and effective drugs.

Table 1. Import statistics of raw materials and finished products of products classified as narcotic drugs (medicines in kg).

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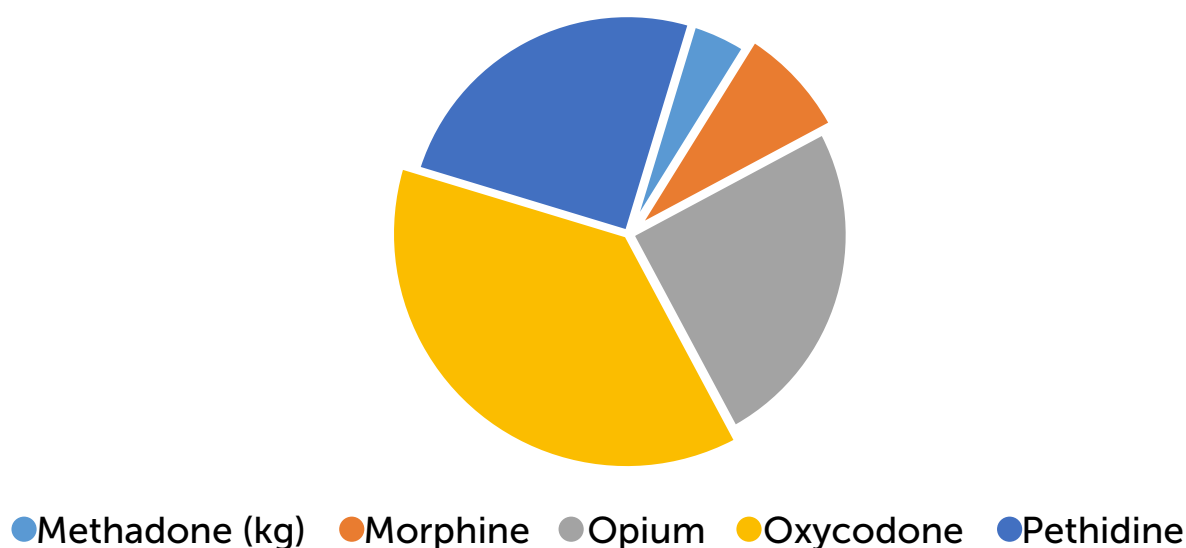
Imported substance	2020	2021	2022
Methadone	2.165	6	5.5
Morphine	5.837	35	20
Opium	10	10	10
Oxycodone	12.22	35	20
Pethidine	10.089	48	35

Source: statistical data from the Narcotics Unit , National Directorate of Medicines

The aforementioned information can be observed in more detail as shown in Figure 2, evidencing the proportionality of the imports of substances and products related to opium.

Figure 2. Import statistics of raw materials and finished products of products classified as narcotics

Import of raw materials and opium derivatives (El Salvador 2020-2022)



Source: statistical data from the Narcotics Unit, National Directorate of Medicines

El Salvador keeps the import information of these drugs updated, and likewise complies with the periodic reports that must be sent as a country to the INCB, therefore, they have an authorized quota for the import of these substances, which facilitates the process of import or export control, since there are pharmaceutical laboratories that transform imported raw materials into medicines that are consumed domestically and that are also exported to the countries of the Central American region.

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