

The SINTES monitoring system

OFDT Contribution to the National Alert Unit in France

In France, the National Alert Unit (Cellule d'Alerte Nationale-CNA) binds together different public health institutions with authority to trigger an alarm concerning illegal psychoactive substances.

The OFDT, which is responsible for monitoring the phenomenon of drugs and drug addiction, contributes to the CNA (cf diagram 1) in three different ways:

- Knowledge about drug user populations, practices and substances used. Putting a signal in perspective with contextual data allowing its assessment;
- Feedback of signal;
- Rapid analysis and signal monitoring.

Two interlinking network systems are responsible for this activity:

- **The TREND system** (recent trends and new drugs) focuses on the monitoring of drug users. It essentially provides ethnographic and contextual information.
- **The SINTES system** (national poison/substance identification system) focuses on the toxicological content of substances:

- Analysis of substances collected directly from the drug user (DU)
- Questionnaire to inform about its context of use and circulation.

Its purposes are twofold:

- **The SINTES-observation**, which enables studies to be conducted on the composition of an illegal substance chosen each year with reasoned collection plans (Cocaine survey in 2006, heroin in 2007-2008, synthetic substances in 2009)
- **The SINTES-monitoring**, which deals with the circulation of new substances or substances constituting a particular hazard.

The SINTES-monitoring system

The SINTES-monitoring system is based on two main activities:

- **Collection and toxicological analysis of all illegal substances obtained from a DU**

Inclusion criteria (IC):

- unusual, potentially severe side effect
- substance with a novel feature (form, name, distribution, etc.)

- Management of the **circulation of information** on these substances among professionals in the harm-reduction or care sector, with the scientific laboratories of law enforcement services and the CNA.

Information sources - 4 main signal sources

- **Socio-health network**

- 12 French regions have a local co-ordinator appointed by the OFDT

This person is in charge of the coordination between the OFDT and the harm reduction or specialist care structures, and acts as a go-between to any professional request for a substance collection. In absence of local coordination, requests for collection are sent directly to the national SINTES co-ordination centre (OFDT).

- 7 of these co-ordination centres also have a permanently active SINTES collector network, created and facilitated by the local co-ordinator.

These collectors are often also ethnographic observers (TREND); they are registered on a list and have a card indicating their SINTES collector status.

- Eg. Development and/or circulation of a new illegal substance (2-CB, mCPP...)
- Eg. Suspected circulation of an unusually dangerous substance (high dose heroin combined with alprazolam in September 2008, very high dose ecstasy, adulterated cannabis etc.).

- **Law enforcement service laboratories**

Agreements with some medico-legal laboratories (Police and Customs) enable systematic communication of data and real-time exchange of information about unusual events.

- **EMCDDA**

The SINTES national co-ordination system is the national arm of the European EWS (Early Warning System).

- Eg. Identification of cannabinoid analogues in Spice and Gorilla mixes

- **Press**

Monitoring is conducted by the OFDT and by several local co-ordination centres.

- Eg. Alarm and summary of the 17 cases of overdose between December 2007 and April 2008

Stages in the collection process (cf diagram 2)

1. Unusual event reported to the OFDT (see CI)
2. Initial evaluation of the information (unusual nature, reliability, severity, possible circulation, etc.).
3. Organisation of a collection when possible: the collector is sent a assignment order allowing the transportation of the illegal substance until it is dispatched to the accredited laboratory.

Diagram 1 - OFDT Contribution to the CNA

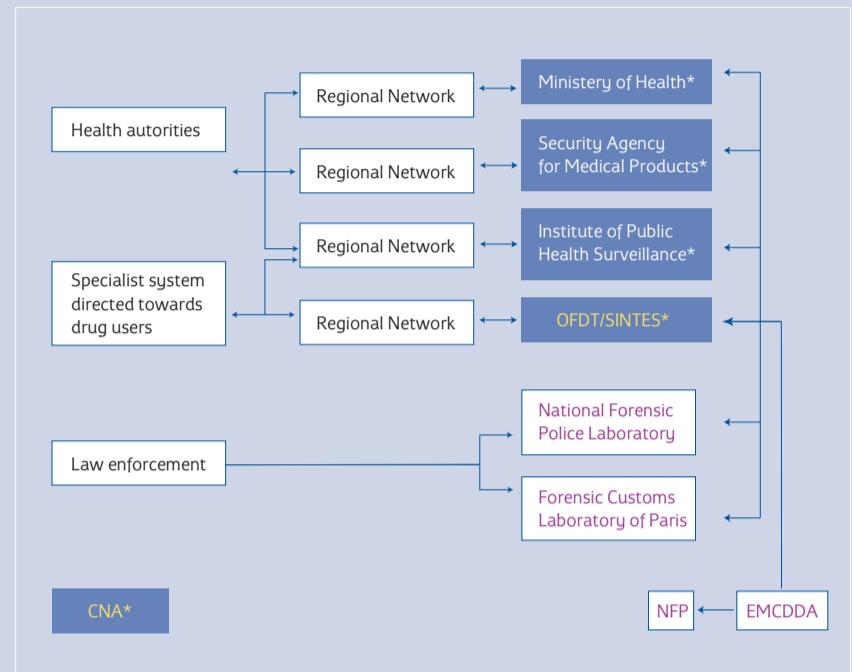
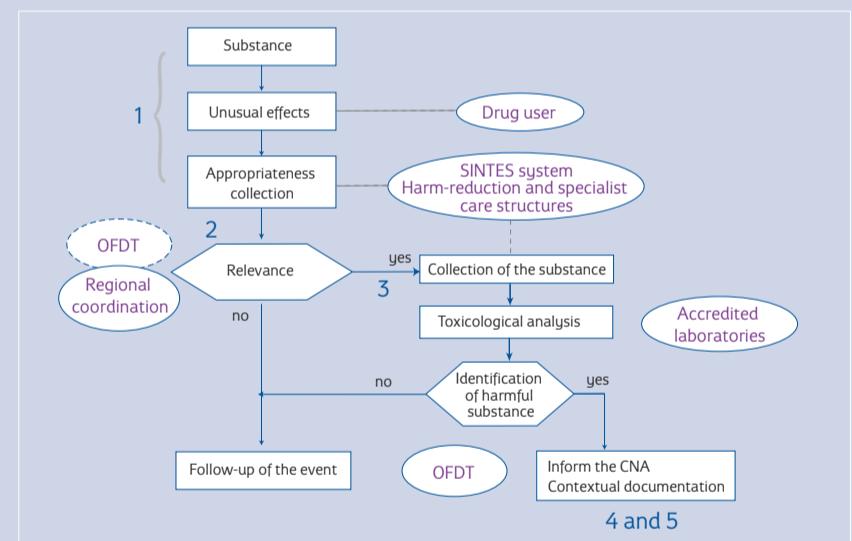


Diagram 2 - SINTES-monitoring - Stages in the collection process



4. Consultation of all the information sources to document the phenomenon as well as possible: if necessary, active searches for samples of suspect substances for analysis.

5. Possible decisions:

- Information sent to the **CNA**. The alarm documentation will be managed collectively and a press release will be drawn up on a collegiate basis if necessary.
- Publication of an information leaflet or Bulletin (document containing all of the information about the SINTES system over the last four months).
- Information sent to the **EMCDDA**, as part of the EWS (reporting form)
- Monitoring of the phenomenon and, depending on its development, updating of information leaflets or new action.

From June 2008 to March 2009: 44 collections:

Who? 12 by SINTES collectors, 24 by harm-reduction and specialist care structures.

Reason for collection? 36% unusual effects, 28% for a known substance but new in the region, 9% for supposedly new substances, 4% OFDT orders, 6 others.

After analysis, 41% of supposed substances did not correspond to actual content.

Distribution of results:

2 press releases (Spice+ Gorilla + Heroin Overdoses).

20 in-house network publications in the information bulletin:

8 Sintes analyses: alprazolam-heroin, 2 CB sold as MDMA, Ritalin, Red star (MDMA+LSD), 4 Fluoroamphetamine, Coke PEP (lidocaine sold as amphetamine).

10 seizures by customs and police

2 reporting forms sent to the EMCDDA (N methyl 1 PEA and 4-FMP).