Drug Abuse - A Reappraisal

R K Chadda

In recent years, there has been a dramatic change in the perception of the problem of drug abuse in our country. Whether the drug abuse has increased to an alarming point or not is debatable. However, taken in the total perspective, one thing is certain that the situation is likely to worsen if proper measures are not taken very soon.

What is drug abuse?

Before defining drug abuse, it is necessary to define what a drug is. A drug is a therapeutic agent - any substance other than food, used in prevention, diagnosis, treatment or cure of a disease in a living being. Drug abuse refers to non-medical use of any drug to experience the pleasurable effects associated with the use of that particular drug. However, the person is not dependent on it. It is different from drug dependence, commonly known as addiction. Drug dependence is a state, psychological or physical, in which the person needs increasing amounts of the drug to get the pleasurable effects of the drug or feels compelled to take the drug for amelioration of the withdrawal effects. Drug dependence can be of psychological or physical type. In the former, the dependent person gets psychological symptoms in the form of anxiety, restlessness or craving. In the latter, the person gets physical symptoms like tremors or fits, nausea, vomiting, aches and pains in different parts of the body, etc. Common drugs which are abused include alcohol, opiates (opium, morphine, heroin, etc.), cannabis products (*bhang, ganja, charas*), barbiturates, cocaine, benzodiazepines (diazepam, lorazepam, etc.), LSD, Mandras (methaqualone), tobacco, etc.

Recent Changes in the phenomenon of Drug abuse

The last two decades have seen a rapid increase in the percentage of drug and alcohol abusers. Alcohol is getting a social sanction over a wider strata of society. There has been a marked increase in the use of heroin (popularly known as smack or brown sugar) in our country in the last few years.

The affected groups have also changed. Earlier, it was usually seen in the elite, the upper middle class and the student community. But today, the class, age and education seem to be no bar to drug and alcohol abuse. New risk groups have emerged, which include youth, both educated and illiterate, employed and unemployed, rural and urban, women, industrial workers, labour class, people in tourism and advertising field.

Development of Drug Abuse and Dependence

A number of factors are responsible for the initiation of drug habit. Usually, a person starts abusing a particular drug on peer pressure or when in face of some stress. Many times, curiosity plays a dominant role. In a small minority, an underlying psychiatric problem may be the cause. Initially, the drug is taken for its pleasurable effect. Gradually, the amount needed to get the desired effect or the high increases and the person develops tolerance to the drug. Whenever the effect of drug goes off, the abuser develops withdrawal symptoms in the form of restlessness, anxiety, loss of appetite, etc. and a craving for the drug. This prompts him to take the drug to counteract the withdrawal effects and thus becomes dependent on the drug.

Drug abusers often keep on changing from one drug to another or mixing drugs, depending on a number of factors like availability, price and need to experience a particular psychic effect or to avoid unpleasant effects due to non-availability. The preferred route of drug intake also keeps on changing, for example, in the case of heroin, it has changed from smoking to chasing.

Sequel to Drug Habits

Drug abuse is accompanied by a number of health and social problems. As a person becomes dependent on drugs, gradually his life style changes. Drugs penetrate in every part of his life. He starts missing his work, ignores all his engagements and neglects his family responsibilities. A major part of his earnings goes in getting drugs. His work performance deteriorates. Many times, addictive behaviour becomes a cause for marital disharmony, divorce and hence family disintegration. A drug abuser may also indulge in criminal behaviour to get drugs when his other resources fail.

Mortality in drug addicts is also much

The author is Lecturer in the department of Psychiatry, UCMS & Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital, Shahadra, Delhi 110032.

higher as compared to general population. Deaths may be due to over-dosage, suicide, accidents or physical complications of drug abuse. Drug abusers also run the risk of developing local abscess, serum hepatitis, AIDS, bacterial endocarditis and pulmonary embolism. Tobacco smoking and alcohol abuse affect the human foetus adversely. Psychiatric illnesses are also more common in drug addicts. In addition, drug abuse leads to a big drain on the national economy by way of reduced productivity and eventual loss of potentially productive young adults in the society.

Treatment Aspects

Treatment of drug dependence comprises of detoxification followed by rehabilitation of the patient. Detoxification refers to freeing of body from adverse effects of the drug. It is done by stopping the drug and medical treatment of various withdrawal symptoms. It usually takes 10 to 21 days, and can be done on out-patient basis or by admitting the patient, depending on the severity of the problem. Detoxification has to be followed by long-term treatment as otherwise relapses are very common. The long term treatment consists in rehabilitation of the patient in society. Depending on the patient's needs after detoxification, psychotherapy, family therapy, behaviour therapy and group therapy are also used. Self help groups like Alcoholic Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous also play an important role in the treatment of drug dependence.

Need of the Hour

There is an urgent need for developing services for treatment of drug dependence, which at present are grossly inadequate. Facilities need to be created to handle all kinds of emergencies related to drug dependence to control mortality and morbidity associated with it. The public should be educated regarding adverse effects of the drugs. Certain high risk populations like students, unemployed youth, migrant workers, industrial labour need constant monitoring. Our country's massive young and adolescent population increases the importance of this step.

There is also a need of strict legal measures, as has been done recently. The role of legal measures, however, is as yet controversial, as this may lead to diversion of illicit drugs to other places and may also lead to drug substitution. It has been seen that in such situations, certain abusers shift to substances like glue, petroleum, which are not drugs, but are equally harmful. Similarly, non-availability of any dependence producing drug can lead to a shift to a newer drug. The above factors can be taken into consideration while restricting the availability of drugs and appropriate measures can be adopted.