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South Africa

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South Africa

South Africa

Since the late 1990s, empirical evidence has strongly suggested a gradual increase in drug-related problems and substance abuse (illicit and prescription) in South Africa. Abuse of alcohol is still the primary issue, but other illegal drugs are a very close in any list of social ills for South Africa. As in most parts of the world, issues and social problems associated with substance abuse continue to be exacerbated and perpetuated by socio-economic and developmental factors in South Africa. This issue is made worse by the fact that South Africa is one of the world's largest producers of some illegal drugs such as marijuana. Many international law enforcement experts offer that this location in Africa is the genesis of much of the cannabis trafficked into the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Extent of Abuse of Prescription Medicines in South Africa

Accurate and reliable national statistics on the prevalence of the use of illicit drugs and on the inappropriate use of over-the-counter or prescription medicines in South Africa are currently not available. This is not to say that there is not considerable abuse of over-the-counter and prescription medicines (e.g. pain relievers, tranquilizers, cough medicines, and diet pills). South Africa, as with most countries have only recently started to systematically collect information on prescription drug abuse. Some compare the growing abuse of legal medications in South Africa to those trends being faced in first world countries. These legal medications are often obtained one of two ways: patient's either get their prescriptions filled out by their doctor or they get the medication from the black market.

Historically South Africa has not had very reliable systems in place to facilitate the collection of any data relating to substance use. What information is available is generally from *ad hoc* cross-sectional research studies often conducted in a single location and from information on police arrests and seizures.

Drug trafficking, consumption and associated problems have all increased dramatically in the last two decades as South Africa has gone through a major political and social transformation and as trade with other countries has increased since the fall of Apartheid (a system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced through legislation by the National Party (NP) governments from 1948 to 1994).

Major influences on substance use in South Africa

Many experts have offered various factors which they believe have contributed to the amount of substance abuse in South Africa. Peer pressure (particularly among young persons) and social drinking among adults combined with increasing availability (particularly in more disadvantaged communities) contribute to other types of substance abuse. Falling price of certain kinds of alcohol and other drugs combined with poor social conditions and boredom will also impact the amount and type of substance abuse experienced. What research that does exist in South Africa offers that the most common reasons for substance abuse include "supporting a habit", to alter mood states, thinking they are improving their health, to cope with personal, social or interpersonal situations, or simply for enjoyment.

Solutions to Prescription Medicine Abuse in South Africa

As in any part of the world, family care and support, combined with improved socio-economic conditions would help to discourage substance abuse. Drug experts offer many suggestions on efforts to be made in South Africa to stem the growing tide of legal and illegal drug abuse. Free access to treatment services for disadvantaged groups and expanding the number of treatment centers, especially into rural areas, would have exponential benefits. Increasing support groups with more skilled staff would help immensely. Obviously, continuing the current community efforts to educate young people about substance abuse is paramount. There is also a need for more in-patient treatment facilities and more infrastructure in general.

Current Prevention Efforts in South Africa

There are a range of initiatives directed towards preventing all type of substance abuse by persons in South Africa. The primary emphasis in South Africa is to try and reach individuals as young as possible in hopes of preventing them from seeking illicit or prescription medicines in general as they reach maturity. The following are some of those efforts:

The national and provincial Department of Welfare embarked upon a national School-based education initiative, *I am addicted to life*.

The national Department of Education is currently involved in implementing its Curriculum 2005" initiative, which amongst other things is supposed to include a life skills education component which will also seek to prevent substance use/abuse.

Soul City is a multi-media health education/counter-advertising initiative seeking to address a range of risk behaviors including alcohol and smoking through a very popular prime-time sitcom aired on TV as well as on radio.

Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol (ARA) has been involved in running the *Buddy Campaign* for almost a decade on university and technikon campuses.

The POPPETS (Programs of Primary Prevention through Stories) is aimed at the pre-primary and early primary school child (primarily 5-9 years old).

Conclusion

Most experts' familiar with the issues facing South Africa offer that prevention interventions and policies are the key to lowering the rates of all types of substance abuse in this country. They also offer that heavy focus on reducing substance abuse by targeting 'at risk populations' would be extremely beneficial. As in every other part of the world there are social issues which will always exist which will place some at more risk for abusing substances than other. Poverty and unemployment combined with a lack of recreational facilities will always be catalyst for such abuse. Also being surrounded by substance abusers, long shifts at work and high stress due to all of these social issues with contribute as well.

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See Also: Apartheid, Impact of; Health, Mental and Physical; Drug Abuse Treatment, Access to; Drug Education programs, Access to.

Further Readings

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