

Editorial**College Campuses: Drug Abuse Havens****Mohsin Masud Jan**

Editor

There are nine million drug addicts in the country of which nearly two million are believed to be in the age of 15 to 25. Drug abuse is rapidly increasing in Pakistan, especially among youth including those in schools, colleges and universities, resulting in serious social and health implications.

The growing trend of drug abuse in education institutions has posed a serious threat to the lives of students. According to one survey, almost 50 per cent students of different educational institutions in Islamabad and Lahore are addicted to drugs, and majority of those students belong to elite class, having no issue of affordability. Drug abuse jeopardises student's health, both physically and mentally, because of which they cannot concentrate on their studies.

Drug trafficking once viewed largely as a social and criminal problem, has transformed in recent years into a major threat to the health and security of people and regions.

Young people are more susceptible to drug use. Young people often talk about the "highs" but may not be aware of the many "lows". The widespread availability of drugs in Pakistan left the souls of the youth as lifeless as they could be.

Each year the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) selects theme for this year it is "Listen First". Listening to children and youth is the first step to help them grow healthy and safe. "Listen First" is an initiative to increase support for prevention of drug use that is based on science and is thus an affective investment in the well-being of children and youth, their families and their communities.

Majority of drug addicts usually start with soft drugs like chhaliya, gutka and pan, and then move to hard drugs like heroin, opium and cocaine, etc. The purchase of drugs or alcohol by young people is usually through dealers or 'agents', who are just a phone call away.

The reason why the number of drug addicts is increasing alarmingly is that the drug cartels in Pakistan are fully backed and supported by the powerful and the wealthy that have got ample influence. Apparently, police and drug mafia are colluding. Moreover, illicit drugs are easily, and cheaply available everywhere in Pakistan.

Often drug abuse is linked to factors such as risk taking behaviours that may involve experimenting with narcotics, smoking and alcohol, social isolation, stress, anxiety, depression, peer pressure (bad company), modern life style, hippy culture, unemployment, excessive pocket money by parents and lack of supervision and attention, the desire for social acceptance, boredom, curiosity, just to feel good, weak religious belief and lot of free time at their disposal, easy access to drugs at low prices, existence and presence of drug dens, to heighten sexual pleasure, to overcome frustration and or tragedies, use as pain medication and fashion.

Most of these drug addicts begin by seeking recreation from drugs that are highly addictive and lead to this anti-social habit. Eventually, the body starts to demand frequent use, until a time comes when the person can no longer function normally without the influence of such drugs.

Researches have proved that people who start smoking cigarettes and or drink alcohol at a young age are much more likely to experiment with illegal drugs than people who do not smoke or drink. "Efforts should be made to

control tobacco smoking in the country because it is the gateway to drug abuse."

While some of the physical effects of drugs might sound nice, they do not last long. Many people get depressed and start feeling sick. Physical health and sexual health of addicts weaken so rapidly that a young man of thirties looks like an old man of over-sixties. Drug use in general leads to a number of health problems, such as malnutrition, apathy, menstrual irregularities and irregular heart rhythm.

Here is economic breakdown of family, loss of self-confidence and will to work, loss of job, indulgence in crimes such as theft, and suicidal thoughts. Drug addicts are also more prone to accidents and are at higher risk of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis, suicide, overdose deaths and cardiovascular diseases. Married drug addicts have high probability of having mentally retarded and physically handicapped children. Young people who use cannabis are doubling their risk of psychotic symptoms like schizophrenia, hallucinations, hearing voices, etc, he explained.

Parents can recognize the addict children by noting these symptoms: deep body medication, strong loss of appetite, difficulty in breathing and fatigue, strong nervous disturbance, long home absences, much money demand, telling lies to get money, isolation, remaining away from others, long sleeping time, laziness, pale face, tremors in fingers, constipation, irregularities in work and studies, no interest in everyday life, red eyes, slurred speech, circles under the eyes, neglect of personal hygiene and marks and traces of abusing on the body.

No one should be stigmatized against because of his dependence on drugs. Law enforcement agencies must treat drug users as victims rather than criminals. Drug dependence is a disease, not a crime. The real criminals are the drug traffickers.

Awareness campaigns through mass media, essay contests, lectures and declamation contest in schools, colleges and universities should be run in order to create awareness about the ill effects of drug addiction.

Provincial education departments should develop a curriculum against drugs for inclusion in textbooks at school, college and university levels. Public awareness campaigns are needed to be run every day on television and radio. All television channels should devote 0.5 per cent of air time to raise awareness on the devastations of drug addiction. More recreational facilities should be created to take the youth off the drugs.

The need of hour is to come up with effective measures to curb this menace. Counsellors should be appointed in education institutions so that students can seek help when needed. Focal persons and vigilance committees should be appointed in education institutions. The anti-narcotics force should play a vigilant and active role and conduct combing operations at education institutions. Installing CCTV cameras at various points in schools, colleges and universities would also help the law-enforcement agencies spotting the group of students involved in the activity. Government agencies should come down hard on drug cartels, which is the only way to reduce the incidence of drug abuse in the country.

Parents should be vigilant and should keep their children busy and motivate them to say their prayers regularly.