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Problems of drug abuse and preventive measures in Poland

H. TOBOLSKA-RYDZ

*Institute of Pharmacy, Medical Centre of Postgraduate Education,
Rydgoszcz, Poland*

ABSTRACT

An increasing abuse of drugs emerged among young people in Poland at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. According to information provided by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, there are currently 35,000 drug abusers, but the actual number is estimated at approximately 200,000. The abuse of extract from poppy straw and the inhalation of volatile solvents, such as glue and paint remover, are the major drug abuse problems. Addicts prepare a decoction of poppy straw for injection, and morphine and heroin have been clandestinely manufactured in very elementary home-made laboratories. Recently, methamphetamine hydrochloride and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) have also been illicitly produced in such home-made laboratories.

The increasing drug abuse problem has prompted the authorities to prepare new complementary drug control legislation, the Act on the Prevention of Narcotic Addiction, which was adopted on 31 January 1985. The Act provides for more effective preventive and treatment measures, as well as severe punishment for involvement in illicit drug trafficking. Treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration of drug-dependent persons is provided on a voluntary basis, except for persons convicted of drug-related offences and for persons under 18 years of age, in which case treatment may be compulsory.

Introduction

During recent years, the problem of drug abuse has increased in Poland, particularly among youth. Drug abuse emerged as a problem of limited size during the 1960s [1-3], but at the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s the problem increased and changed in character, mainly involving young people who began to use psycho-active substances, which had not been used before. It was obvious that drug abuse had become part of a socio-cultural phenomenon that had emerged at that time [4-6].

The extent of drug abuse

In Poland, as in many other countries, there is a scarcity of data on drug abuse, which would permit a more accurate and complete assessment of the problem. According to data of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, there are 35,000 drug addicts in the country, but the real number is estimated at approximately 200,000. The abuse of poppy-straw extract by injection is one of the major drug abuse problems. The sniffing of volatile solvents, such as glue and paint remover, is another major problem. It should be noted that both opiates and volatile solvents are easily obtainable.

According to data of the Ministry of Interior Affairs [1, 7], approximately 13,000 persons have violated drug control laws over the last few years. Over 90 per cent of the drug addicts are dependent on opiates, which are produced in home-made laboratories from poppy straw and raw opium [2, 4, 8, 9]. In 1974, 3,298 drug addicts were admitted for treatment, while in 1984 the number increased by 139.5 per cent to 7,900 [5, 10]. During that period, the number of addicted people who came to the attention of the police increased by 246 per cent [1, 4, 8].

The number of drug-related deaths that have occurred over the last few years is also a cause for concern. For example, in 1984, 115 drug-related deaths were recorded. It is believed that all such deaths may not have been recorded and that the real number could be higher [5].

On the basis of the available indicators, it may be stated that the drug abuse problem is on the increase, affecting predominantly young people, both students and out-of-school youth. The results of a study have shown that 15 per cent of the respondents are under the age of 17; 40 per cent are in the "16-19-year" age group; 75 per cent are under the age of 24; and only 3 per cent are over 30 years of age.

Clandestine laboratories

Clandestine laboratories producing narcotic drugs contribute to a great extent to the spread of drug abuse in Poland [11-13]. Over the past six years, morphine and heroin have been produced from poppy straw in so-called "home technology". Methamphetamine hydrochloride and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) have also been recently manufactured in home-made clandestine laboratories.

Clandestine laboratories are usually located in places that do not arouse suspicion, such as apartments, cellars, attics and garages. Such operations usually lack the qualified personnel and equipment required by laboratories, which makes it difficult to produce pure substances and to

standardize production. Thus, the drugs produced by such laboratories are often unsafe.

The emergence of clandestine laboratories has caused considerable public concern because, by producing illicit drugs of uncertain and unsafe quality at a time when drug abuse is increasing, such laboratories may add to the number of drug-related deaths.

Society's response

In order to prevent the further spread of drug abuse and to reduce the present problem, it is necessary to promote preventive and treatment measures [14–16], which include drug control measures implemented by the government authorities and state institutions concerned, as well as activities of social organizations and the various sectors of society aimed at preventing and reducing drug abuse.

In order to promote such measures, new complementary drug control legislation was adopted on 31 January 1985 as the Act on the Prevention of Narcotic Addiction. The Act makes it possible to undertake more effective preventive and treatment measures, as well as measures to suppress the illicit supply of drugs [17]. Previous legal provisions were inadequate [18, 19] to deal with the specific nature of the Polish "narcotic scene", which is mainly characterized by the abuse of easily available poppy-straw extract and volatile solvents [3, 10].

Preventive measures

The Act of the Prevention of Drug Abuse of 31 January 1985 provides for preventive measures, as well as prophylactic treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of persons abusing drugs [18–21].

The Act also provides for severe punishment of persons involved in illicit drug traffic and in the distribution of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. The list of substances to be controlled in Poland is established by the Ministry of Health.

By virtue of the Act, the authorities have undertaken comprehensive measures to prevent drug abuse and to create conditions for the treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration of drug-dependent persons. In addition to the government institutions concerned, various social organizations, churches, trade unions and other non-governmental organizations have been encouraged to become involved in combating drug abuse problems.

A Commission on the Prevention of Drug Addiction has been established by the Government to co-ordinate activities of various social sectors involved in combating drug problems. The Commission includes representatives of the social organizations, trade unions and scientific institutions concerned, in addition to a representative of the government authorities.

Control of the cultivation of opium poppies and cannabis

Special measures have been adopted to control the cultivation of *Papaver somniferum L.* and *Cannabis sativa L.* The requirements for cultivating either of the two are a licence from the local state authorities, and a special contract to supply the state agency with the harvested crop. This crop is then legitimately used as raw material for the pharmaceutical, food and textile industries. Licensed cultivation is subject to certain special conditions, which include the amount of the crop to be produced and the control and supervision of the cultivation by state authorities, in order to prevent diversion of plants to illicit channels. Unauthorized cultivation of either opium poppies or cannabis is punishable by two years of imprisonment and a fine. In addition, individual farmers are authorized to cultivate poppies for their own consumption (mainly for the poppy seeds), provided the farmers have obtained a licence from the local state authorities and the area of land on which the poppies are cultivated does not exceed 20 m².

Suppression of drug trafficking

Narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, which are subject to control measures, can be obtained for medical purposes on the basis of a special prescription; a copy of the prescription is kept in the health facility. The prescribing practice is subject to strict control. Illegal trade in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances is punishable with up to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine. Still more severe penalties are imposed for the illicit importation, exportation or transportation of drugs.

Treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration of drug-dependent persons

Treatment with a simultaneous rehabilitation and social reintegration is provided for drug-dependent persons on a voluntary basis. Drug-dependent persons under 18 years of age may be subject to compulsory treatment and rehabilitation, but the maximum duration of such treatment is two years. These young people are referred to for compulsory treatment by the family court at the request of their parents or tutors. Adults are

provided with treatment and rehabilitation on a voluntary basis. The treatment of persons convicted of drug-related offences, however, may be compulsory. Voluntary treatment is considered a precondition for success, and all efforts are made to strengthen the individual's will to overcome his or her drug dependence.

Concluding remarks

In spite of the drug abuse control measures that have been implemented, the problem of drug abuse in Poland has been growing steadily. Delinquency related to drug abuse in Poland increased from 1973 to 1983 by an average of 107 offences, or 6.3 per cent, a year [1, 22].

Public response to the threat of drug abuse to people's health and welfare resulted in social initiatives such as the concerted action taken by youth that led to the establishment of the Society for the Prevention of Drug Abuse (MONAR). MONAR has brought together medical doctors, educators, priests, sociologists and other members of society who are genuinely interested in becoming involved in programmes of prevention and in helping drug-dependent persons to live without drugs. The Government, for its part, has established special councils to deal with the drug problem. Only co-ordinated action involving various meaningful social initiatives, such as MONAR, and the effective programmes of the institutional services of the State can effectively cope with drug abuse and the problems associated with it.

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