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PROGRAMME ON
**SUBSTANCE
ABUSE**

Abuse
Trends
Linkage
Alerting
System
(ATLAS)



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

ABUSE TRENDS LINKAGE ALERTING SYSTEM (ATLAS)

Both alcohol and drug-related problems are being increasingly reported by national authorities in both developed and developing countries. The abuse of licit drugs is also becoming more common and is now a public health concern in many of the least developed parts of the world where parallel markets of prescription drugs are emerging.

At the same time the health implications of substance abuse in general are becoming better understood. A variety of blood-borne and non-communicable diseases are now known to be associated with different modalities of substance abuse. Epidemiological patterns of these diseases are changing together with the changing demography of drug and alcohol abuse in which younger and new social groups are being affected.

Injecting abuse of drugs such as heroin, cocaine and amphetamines multiplies health risks, including overdose deaths and the spread of HIV infection. Less well recognized but also significant health problems associated with the abuse of substances include hepatitis, tuberculosis, cardiovascular diseases, neuropsychiatric disorders, sexual disinhibition and sexually transmitted diseases, fetal distress and growth problems of children born to drug abusing mothers, accidents, injuries, violence and suicide.

In addition to its direct impact on individual and family health, substance abuse also has a major impact on work productivity, family economy, and community organization. The overall costs to society thus go well beyond the immediate health implications.

In recent years there has been an accumulation of new knowledge about the nature of substance abuse and its broad implications for society. This body of knowledge has been complemented by a growing acceptance that the control of substance abuse must be accompanied by prevention policies that emphasize demand reduction.

The formulation of national strategies and activities to deal effectively with this complex problem, however, continues to be hampered by the lack of information available to national and international bodies. Data on the prevalence and distribution of drug-specific use patterns is often lacking as are specific data in the area of alcohol abuse. A combination of technical, political, cultural and social factors still make diagnosis and reporting of substance abuse difficult. As a result, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation work is itself being hampered by the lack of precise information, especially with regard to specific population groups.

An integral part of the Programme's plan of work is an international substance abuse monitoring system that will provide the basis for regular reporting of global trends in substance abuse, their health implications, and the effectiveness of prevention and control measures. The Abuse Trends Linkage Alerting System (ATLAS) is a global monitoring system. It is differentiated from other monitoring systems by its emphasis on health and the health impact of substance abuse and by its global coordinating capacity.

ATLAS will draw upon current international reporting and monitoring systems and will work closely with other UN groups in mutually complementary ways. It will also seek to build on national health and welfare reporting systems and will enhance their capacity to gather and compile data in this area by providing technical support and training. Since many of the data bases currently in use are limited in their scope and representativeness additional information will be gathered using point-prevalence surveys and in-depth studies. ATLAS will utilise WHO Collaborating Centres and other national and regional bodies so as to provide as broad and current a series of situation assessments as possible. It will work closely with and through WHO Regional Offices and assist in the gathering of information that is especially relevant to their needs and interests.

Specifically, ATLAS will seek to provide a comprehensive global overview of drug and alcohol use/abuse patterns together with the health and social welfare implications associated with them. It will emphasise the need for improved quality of data and the standardisation of quantitative and qualitative methods that can be used in as many countries as possible. These data will be used both at a national and an international level as a basis for describing comparative trends and as a foundation for formulating and monitoring new policies and programmes. In as much as data collection in this area may be new to many communities, ATLAS will also be used to strengthen national monitoring systems and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology between developed and developing countries.

The complete list of items that will be covered by ATLAS in its annual reports is attached.

I. Substance abuse in contemporary society

- brief reference to history of substance abuse
- reference to global nature of problem
- reference to some of the social changes that contribute

II. Changes in known patterns of abuse in last 20 years

- traditional and new drugs
- social groups affected
- known geographical distribution of problem

III. Importance of problem and need for current and regular information

- relevance to public health planning
- relevance to treatment and care models
- relevance to prevention models
- need for national monitoring using alternative sources

IV. Current constraints to information and monitoring

- political, social and cultural attitudes
- covert nature of problem
- difficulties in health monitoring

V. Sources of information used by ATLAS

- national health statistics
- national survey data
- UN reports
- other monitoring data
- PSA surveys, including qualitative and quantitative
- pharmaceutical industry reports
- police reports

VI. Current magnitude of problem

- illicit drugs involved
- licit drugs involved
- alcoholic beverages involved
- groups (age, sex, urban/rural, occupation etc.)
- countries
- regions and sub-regions

VII Health implications (by age, sex, etc)

- TB
- AIDS
- Endocarditis
- Neoplastic diseases
- Respiratory infections
- Reproductive health eg FES
- Suicide
- Homicide
- Sexually transmitted diseases

VIII. Implications for Health and Social Welfare

- Care and treatment models and known efficacy
- Costs
- Human resource needs
- Work days lost
- Family impact
- Development and maturation

IX. Summary

- By each of the above categories

X. Recommendations

- To countries
- To UN

XI. Bibliography