



Letter to Editor

JMR 2015; 2(4): 86-87
July- August
ISSN: 2395-7565
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Developing Drug De-addiction Services in East Sikkim, Report by Singtam District Hospital

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According to World Drug Report, an estimated 250 million people between the ages of 15 and 64 had used at least one substance in 2014. Approximately 29 million people are suffering with substance use disorder with 207,000 deaths in 2014^[1].

In the NHS, Cannabis (3%) and opioids (0.7%) were the commonest illicit substances prevalent in India. Data from Drug Abuse Monitoring Survey observes that cannabis (11.6%), heroin (11%), opium (8.6%) and other opiates (6.3%) constitute the majority of drug use by treatment seekers other than alcohol (43.9%) in India^[2]. Alcohol and non-medical use of psychoactive substance use has become a matter of serious concern in Sikkim. From unofficial estimates alcohol use has traditionally been prevalent among Sikkim's population which is reflected in the national surveys. In Sikkim, prevalence of licit substance (tobacco & Alcohol) use is more common than the use of illicit substances. NFHS-3 has revealed a very high prevalence of current alcohol use at 45% and 19% for males and females respectively in Sikkim. These figures are much higher than the national average of 32% and 2% in males and females. There is an increase in trend towards current alcohol use in particular from NFHS-2 to NFHS-3 which may be due to greater availability, accessibility, affordability, and social acceptability^[3,4]. Though Sikkim was declared a smoke free state, the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS India 2010) reported the overall prevalence of current tobacco use was 42% higher than the national average of 35%^[5]. However, there is a growing recognition that newer substances are becoming popular among the younger generation. Epidemiological data on illicit substances is scarce and it is hard to draw any conclusion about the recent trends in illicit substance use pattern in Sikkim.

A psychoactive substance (drug) is a chemical that acts in our brain and plays with our feelings, emotions, thinking and behaviour^[6]. It is similar to virus that can hijack human software (brain) and interfere with normal growth and development of adolescents / school going children. Drug addiction usually starts during adolescent period as early as 10-12 years. They are introduced to harmful chemicals by their peers, older relatives, drug peddlers and drug supplier without adequate knowledge about harmful effects. Treatment of drug addiction is complicated by multiple relapses. Therefore the best treatment of addiction is always prevention. The question is where and to whom these prevention efforts should be targeted. Since drug addiction begins during adolescent's period as early as 10 years of age, any programs that endeavor to prevent drug addiction should target schools, children, adolescents and youths by empowering them with information, knowledge and education regarding harmful effects of substance misuse. Further, it is imperative that parents and teachers should be sensitized on early signs and symptoms of drug abuse, harmful effects, service availability and strategies for school based prevention programs. Hon'ble Chief Minister of Sikkim has time and again raised concerns regarding increasing trends in substance misuse by youths and personally been conducting interactive session with students to sensitize them about harmful consequences of drug abuse. Under his vision of "Drug Free State", the Department of Health, Govt of Sikkim has already initiated several campaigns to reach out to students, women, children and especially rural population. The Dept of Health initiated capacity / skill building programs to develop human resource in the field of drug deaddiction services. The State is also in the process of establishing Center for Addiction Medicine to make service provision for detoxification, rehabilitation based on scientific methods of treatment, research and training center to develop human resource in the field of drug dependence treatment services in North-eastern State.

The Singtam District Hospital observed "East District Substance Abuse Prevention Week" w.e.f 20 June to 26 June 2016 as a part of international day against drug abuse and illicit trafficking based on theme

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“Message of hope: Substance dependence is preventable and treatable” by conducting widespread awareness cum educational campaign to sensitize students, youths and general public about harmful effects of drugs misuse in all the 7 PHC (Rangpo, Pakyong, Samdong, Sang, Machong, Rongli and Rhenock PHC) and Singtam. The team conducted 19 programs in Schools and community this year. Several activities such as rally, essay competition, debate, painting competition, skit play were organized to convey the message that drug addiction leads to brain disease, treatment is possible and prevention (not to start at all) is the best treatment. The Singtam Hospital has also adopted “Sirwani Secondary School” for peer based program to effect change at the individual level by attempting to modify a person’s knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behavior as one of the strategy to prevent substance misuse among students in high risk zone. Approx 20 peer educators were nominated after initial assessment by School administration for continuous training on adolescent health primarily focusing on prevention / control of tobacco, alcohol and other illegal substance of abuse. They will be trained by psychiatrist & counselors every Saturday on various developmental issues to build their self confidence, positive thinking and positive habits, and develop their resources to disseminate health related information to their peers in schools and community. Special OPD clinic for treatment of tobacco, alcohol and other substance misuse along with designated Opioids substitution therapy (OST) was started in Singtam District Hospital in 2013. A special campaign “Winning Ways to Well Being” was started to promote drug demand reduction amongst students in East District0 by actively involving medical officers /Health educator of Primary Health Centers (PHC). The Team visited 68 Schools and 10 Colleges in 2014 & 2015 respectively to educate students regarding harmful effects of tobacco, alcohol and other illegal substances, science of addiction, adolescent’s brain and vulnerability for addiction, lifeskills education, and treatment availability for quitting legal & illegal substance.

The Department of Health, Government of Sikkim has initiated several innovative programs to address the problem of substance misuse primarily targeting demand reduction through school based initiative and harm minimization efforts to make service provision for people with substance dependence. However, the fight against substance abuse demands extensive community participation, ownership and action to address easy availability of substance in the respective community.

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