Review Article

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Substance Abuse in Bangladesh : A Review

Ajoy Deb[1*]

ABSTRACT

Background: Substance abuse has become a serious public health problem in Bangladesh. What was once a small and traditional issue has now grown into a widespread social problem. It affects many groups in society. Although the government has introduced strict anti-drug policies, rehabilitation services are still overcrowded and not easily available to everyone. Because of this, many people are calling for a more complete and effective approach to deal with the problem. This review was aimed to look into the substance abuse in Bangladesh based on current leterature.

Methodology: This current study is a narative review to published studies and articles by using PubMed and Google. Search strategy using appropriate key words and title.

Conclusion: This review revealed early adulthood was more risky years, males are mostly affected by drugs, peer pressure was most significant influencing risk factor and heroin is the mostly expected drug in Bangladesh.

KEY WORDS

Drug abuse; Demography; Heroin; Substance abuse; Yaba.

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse can be defined as using a drug in a way that is inconsistent with the medical or social norms and despite adverse consequences. Substance abuse is recognized as an important public health and social problem in Bangladesh.[1,2] The incidence of drug abuse has been increasing day by day in a developing country like Bangladesh.[2] Drug addiction hampers the mental well-being of an individual as well as it causes lots of physical complications.[2] Interms of geographical location Bangladesh is situated in the central point of the world's biggest growing narcotics zone: The 'Golden Crescent' (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) and the 'Golden Triangle' (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand). So, the country has become a major transit point for drug dealers.[3] They are routing their shipments through this country to the markets of other parts of the world including Europe, Africa and America. Besidest his, India, which is an important producer of opium and other substances located around Bangladesh. Though there was no available exact estimation of substance abusers in Bangladesh, on the basis of different and statistics, it canbe estimated that the number maybe more than 6 million and these people spend over 70 million BDT every day on illegal narcotics.[3] The major illicit drugs available in Bangladesh are opium derivatives (Heroin, Pethidine) cannabis (Marijuana, Ganja, Chorosh, Bhang, Hashish) stimulants (Yaba, Cocaine) sleeping pills, cough syrup (Phensidyl, Dexpotent etc.) and few others.[1,4] The problem is increasing day by day and threatening the nation. Males are being affected by drugs more than the females and early adult hood is the vulnerable age for abusing drugs.[1] Preferable drugs are heroin, yaba, cannabis, followed by few others. However, it is under studied in the country. No nation-wide prevalence study has been published yet. So it is aimed to look into the substance abuse in Bangladesh based on the existing literature.

Search Strategy : Availabel studies and abstract were identified through PubMed and Google Schlar (2008-2024). Key search topics were "Substance Abuyse in Bangladesh: A Review" and relevant articles from reference lists of reviewd articles were also searched. The search term were the following key words used in combination; Drug abuse; Demography; Heroin; Substance abuse; Yaba. Biblography was also searched from relevant full text.

1. Dean, Basic Science and Paraclinical Science
Chittagong Medical University &
Professor of Community Medicine & Public Health (Retired)
Chittagong Medical College, Chattogram.

*Correspondence : Dr. Ajoy Deb
Email: ajoy97@gmail.com
Cell : +88 01711 74 92 34

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DISCUSSION

Substance abuse in Bangladesh

Substance abuse in Bangladesh has emerged as a significant public health concern, with far-reaching implications for individuals, families and society at large. The problem is deeply intertwined with mental health challenges, socio-economic factors and the availability of illicit drugs.[5,6] Rapid urbanization, economic pressures, and sociocultural changes have contributed to the growing prevalence of drug abuse, particularly among adolescents and young adults.[5,7] The situation is further complicated by the co-existence of substance use disorders and mental health conditions, which often go unaddressed due to inadequate healthcare services.[8]

Prevalence and Patterns of Substance Abuse

The prevalence of substance abuse in Bangladesh is alarmingly high, with approximately 5 million drug addicts reported in the country. Heroin is the most widely abused drug, followed by Yaba (A methamphetamine-based substance) Phensedyl and Cannabis.[9] The use of Yaba, in particular, has seen a dramatic rise, with students, entertainment industry workers and affluent youths being the most vulnerable groups.[10,11] The ease of access to these drugs, facilitated by illicit drug-dealing groups and the proliferation of technology, has further exacerbated the problem.[10]

Current Drug Policy and Legal Framework

Bangladesh has enacted several laws to combat drug abuse, including the Mental Health Act and the Narcotics Control Act. These laws aim to regulate the production, distribution and use of psychoactive substances while providing a framework for the management of substance use disorders.[8] However, the implementation of these laws remains inconsistent, and the lack of coordination between healthcare, social, and legal agencies continues to hinder effective enforcement.[8,12,13]

Rehabilitation and Treatment Services

The availability of rehabilitation and treatment services for drug addicts in Bangladesh is limited, with most facilities operating below international standards.[10,9] The majority of treatment centers are either government-run or operated by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with a focus on detoxification and counseling.[14,15] However, these services are often insufficient to meet the growing demand, leading to a significant treatment gap.[12]

Public Health Implications

Substance abuse has severe public health implications in Bangladesh, including the spread of blood-borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis B and C among injecting drug users.[14] Additionally, drug abuse is linked to increased healthcare costs, decreased job productivity, and a rise in violent crimes.[9] The mental health of drug users is also a significant concern, with many experiencing depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies during withdrawal.[5,10]

Role of Psychoactive Substances

Psychoactive substances, such as methamphetamine and caffeine, play a crucial role in the drug abuse epidemic in Bangladesh. Yaba, a highly addictive substance combining methamphetamine and caffeine, has become particularly problematic due to its widespread availability and potent effects.[10,11] The use of these substances leads to significant neurological and physical damage, including lung, liver and brain damage, which further complicates the treatment process.[10]

The Way Forward: Recommendations for Effective Drug Policy and Rehabilitation

To address the growing problem of substance abuse in Bangladesh, a multi-faceted approach is necessary.

Legislative Reform: Further refine the legal framework to fully decriminalize drug use and possession for personal use, focusing criminal justice resources on high-level trafficking and organized crime.

Integrated Strategy: Develop an integrated national strategy that coordinates efforts across health, law enforcement, education and social welfare sectors, with clear accountability mechanisms.

Treatment Expansion: Significantly increase investment in treatment infrastructure, aiming to double treatment capacity by 2030, with particular attention to underserved rural areas.

Quality Improvement: Establish national standards for treatment quality and implement regular monitoring and accreditation systems for all treatment facilities.

Workforce Development: Invest in specialized training for healthcare professionals, social workers, and counselors in evidence-based approaches to substance use disorders.

Enhanced Surveillance: Strengthen national drug monitoring systems, incorporating routine testing of drug samples and systematic data collection on new psychoactive substances.

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Effectiveness Research: Conduct rigorous evaluations of prevention and treatment interventions to identify the most effective approaches in the Bangladesh context.

Social Determinants: Expand research on the social determinants of substance abuse in Bangladesh, examining how factors such as poverty, urbanization, and changing social structures influence drug use patterns.

Table I Comparison of Key Aspects of Substance Abuse in Bangladesh

Aspect	Key Findings
Prevalence	Approximately 5 million drug addicts, with heroin being the most abused drug.[9]
Patterns of Abuse	Yaba use is rising, particularly among students and affluent youths.[10,11]
Legal Framework	Mental Health Act and Narcotics Control Act aim to regulate drug use.[8]
Rehabilitation Services	Limited availability of treatment facilities, with a focus on detoxification.[10,13]
Public Health Impact	High risk of blood-borne diseases and increased healthcare costs.[13,9]

CONCLUSION

Substance abuse in Bangladesh is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive and integrated approach to address its root causes and mitigate its impact on public health. By strengthening drug policies, improving rehabilitation services and raising public awareness, Bangladesh can take significant steps toward reducing the prevalence of substance abuse and promoting the well-being of its population.

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