

USE OF PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES: A NEW-OLD CHALLENGE

Isabel Amélia Costa Mendes¹

Margarita Antonia Villar Luis²

Since the 1980's, international organizations like the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization, Ministries and Secretariats responsible for local health guidelines in different countries have recognized the consequences of psychoactive substance use, not only for the individual consumer, but also for families, other related persons and communities in general.

The 2002 World Health Report indicated that 8.9% of the global number of diseases result from psychoactive substance consumption. The same report informed that, in 2000, tobacco was present in 4.1%, alcohol in 4% and illicit drugs in 0.8% of the global disease burden. Part of this burden, related to substance consumption and chemical addiction, results from sanitary and social problems, including the dissemination of HIV/AIDS through the use of injectable drugs⁽¹⁾.

Different health problems associated with the consumption and addiction to tobacco, alcohol and other licit and illicit substances require greater attention from health professionals and demand appropriate reactions and public policies, with a view to solving or at least minimizing these problems in different societies. There are still a lot of gaps to fill in knowledge about issues related to substance use and chemical addiction. Hence, it is important to join the efforts of representatives from all social sectors: politicians, lawmakers, researchers, health professionals and other groups of civil society.

For health professionals, chemical addiction is not a new problem; it is hard to find a professional who has not attended psychoactive substance users with diseases related to alcohol or tobacco consumption. One essential issue nowadays is the change in attitudes towards this clientele, since prejudice and discrimination feature among the main obstacles to treatment and care for persons facing chemical addiction and related problems.

A study held by the World Health Organization in 2001, aimed at evaluating attitudes towards 18 disabilities in 14 countries, disclosed that "harmful substance use" ranked first or among the first in terms of disapproval or social prejudice⁽²⁾.

Health professionals were among the persons who gave their opinion and nurses certainly are no exception. Studies in the United States and Brazil have already showed nurses' discomfort in working with this population, as well as the limited theoretical-practical knowledge they receive during education.

It is known that psychoactive substance consumption is and will continue as a part of daily work in nursing and other health services; its presence can no longer be ignored, sometimes much closer than we want, but that is no reason to ignore it. The use of alcohol and other drugs is occupying a place in society which used to belong to other habits; it is undeniable that (young and adult) people are searching for the pleasant, relaxing or anaesthetic effects of these substances. First, attitudes towards this problem and its serious consequences must change in public bodies, including those responsible for health.

It is the function of nurses to seek knowledge about the theme and change the attitude of denying the problem, in order to face questions such as the use of psychoactive substances and dependence, involving actions based on humanitarian standards and respect for citizenship.

No matter the level of consumption and the kind of substance that is used, users are individuals with the same

¹ Chair of the Latin American Journal of Nursing Directive Council, Full Professor, Dean, e-mail: iamendes@eerp.usp.br; ² Vice-chair of the Latin American Journal of Nursing Directive Council ; Full Professor, Vice-Dean, e-mail: margarit@eerp.usp.br. University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing, WHO Collaborating Centre for Nursing Research Development

rights to health, education, work opportunities and reintegration into society, just like any other human being. Thus, they deserve a cordial and respectful reception by professional caretakers.

In the same way, actions towards various community groups must consider health promotion and programs to prevent the harmful use of psychoactive substances, elaborated in partnership with community representatives.

As a product of institutional policies and actions, this supplement of the Latin American Journal of Nursing presents 19 articles that focus on the use of psychoactive substances, written by nurses who participated in the program developed by the UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO AT RIBEIRÃO PRETO COLLEGE OF NURSING (EERP-USP) in partnership with the INTER-AMERICAN DRUG ABUSE CONTROL COMMISSION (CICAD/OAS). These papers were developed on the basis of the monographs they wrote for the Research Specialization course on this theme, supported by this international body. The contents report on research experiences about this subject in 9 Latin American countries. It is expected that the knowledge created by these studies will be a seed for the future realization of many other studies, whether on human resource formation or knowledge creation and – based on this knowledge – implementation of strategic actions that may contribute to reducing drugs use and, moreover, help to establish new policies in the search for a solution to this problem, which substantially affects society on a global scale.

Moreover, this scientific journal perpetuates more than just the product of the OAS/CICAD's investment in the human capital of Latin American nursing in favor of the drugs demand reduction program: it also registers our recognition and gratitude to the governments of Japan, the USA and Canada for their sensibility and political action in supporting the OAS/CICAD project for Nursing Schools, allowing us to reach these results. We address our gratitude to the OAS for enabling and promoting the development of this project and the achievement of its goals, and for believing in the capacity of our institutions and in the competency of our human resources.

REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. The World health report 2002. Geneva (SWZ): WHO; 2002.
2. Room R. Cross cultural views on stigma, valuation, parity and societal values Toward disability. In: Ustun TB. Disability and Culture: universalism and diversity. Seattle (WA): Hogrefe & Huber; 2001. p. 247-91.