

11 March, 2011 | Islamabad -- To reduce the health and social impacts of drug dependence in Pakistan, the United Nations and Pakistani authorities have joined forces to ensure drug users have access to appropriate treatment and care.

The Joint Programme on Drug Dependence Treatment and Care is an initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office for Drug Control (UNODC) that has already been launched in Albania, Haiti and Serbia. The programme aims to promote and support evidence-based and ethical treatment policies, strategies and interventions for drug use and dependence.

Drug use and dependence is a concern in Pakistan. Its 2006 National Assessment Report on Problem Drug Use estimated there are 628,000 opiate users in the country, with around 482,000 (77%) being heroin users. The number of injecting drug users in 2006 was estimated at 125,000, double the estimated figure for 2000.

"In many countries, drug dependence treatment can be a low priority on the political agenda, and this needs to change, particularly when we look at how people's health can be impacted by drug dependence," says Dr Vladimir Poznyak, WHO coordinator of substance abuse disorders, who is in Pakistan as part of a joint WHO-UNODC mission. "Drug use is one of the top 20 risk factors to health worldwide and drug use disorders are associated with increased risks of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, tuberculosis, suicide, overdose deaths and cardiovascular diseases."

Drug dependence and illicit drug use are associated with health problems, poverty, violence, criminal behaviour, and social exclusion, says Dr. Gilberto Gerra, chief of UNODC's Drug Prevention and Health Branch. "On top of the health and other costs, drug dependence also involves social costs in the form of loss of productivity and family income, security, social cohesion, developmental opportunities, traffic and workplace accidents," says Dr Gerra. "These result in overwhelming economic costs and an unacceptable waste of human resources."

Through the joint programme, UNODC and WHO aim to increase awareness of the health and social problems associated with drug use, and of the benefits of taking action. A first step in Pakistan for the programme will be to support ongoing national efforts to enhance accessibility to and the quality and coverage of services for preventing and treating drug-related problems. This can be done by building up the capacity of the health system. WHO and UNODC will bring

together all Pakistani stakeholders involved in providing services for persons with drug use disorders.

Dr Guido Sabatinelli, WHO's representative to Pakistan, says: "We applaud Pakistan for taking this action to improve the lives of people with substance dependence. Providing treatment to people suffering from this disease and small investments in treatment services can have large impacts for the drug users, their families and society at large.

There is a need to develop an integrated health response to drug dependence in light of the links between drug use and HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and TB." Drug dependence is like any chronic disease and drug users undergoing treatment often require a multidisciplinary approach, including pharmacological and psychosocial interventions to achieve best results.

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