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ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE TRENDS: July - December 2008 (Phase 25)

Background

The SACENDU Project is an alcohol and other drug (AOD) sentinel surveillance system now operational in 9 provinces in South Africa: Western Cape (WC: Cape Town); KwaZulu-Natal (KZN); Eastern Cape (EC); Mpumalanga (MP) and Limpopo (LP) (combined as the Northern Region: NR); Gauteng (GT: Johannesburg, Pretoria); Free State (FS), Northern Cape (NC), and Northwest (NW) (combined as the Central Region (CR)). The system, operational since 1996, monitors trends in AOD use and associated consequences on a six-monthly basis from specialist AOD treatment programmes. **This report will focus on data on treatment admissions from the 9479 patients seen across the 66 centres/programmes in the 2nd half of 2008 (i.e. 2008b).**

Latest key findings by substance of abuse (unless stated otherwise the findings relate to the 2nd half of 2008)

Alcohol remains the dominant substance of abuse across all sites except the WC and the NR. Between 28% (WC) and 67% (CR) of patients in treatment have alcohol as a primary drug of abuse. The proportion reporting it as a primary drug of abuse (Table 1) remained fairly stable in all sites, when compared to the 1st half of 2008. Treatment admissions for alcohol-related problems in persons under 20 years of age are generally less common, ranging between 3% (WC) and 20% (KZN) of all patients in this age group (Table 1).

Table 1. Primary drug of abuse (%) for all patients and patients under 20 years – selected drugs (2008b)

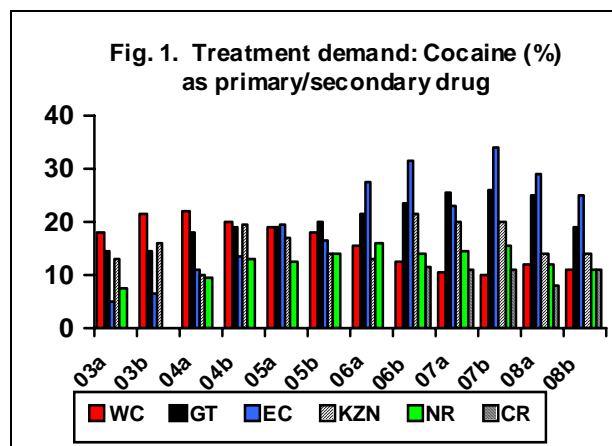
	Age	WC	KZN	EC	GT	NR ¹	CR ²
# centres		24	7	4	22	5	4
# patients		2807	1537	612	3158	729	636
Alcohol	All	28	48	44	48	34	67
	<20	3	22	19	14	12	18
Cannabis	All	14	16	17	22	45	12
	<20	42	47	48	57	64	43
Methaq.	All	3	1	9	2	0.3	0.3
	<20	2	1.2	14	5	0	0
Cocaine	All	6	6	12	9	5	6
	<20	2	1.2	6	3	1.7	2
Heroin	All	13	24	6	6	9	0.3
	<20	8	21	3	6	14	0
Methamphetamine	All	35	0	5	0.3	0	0
	<20	39	0	4	0.5	0	0

1-Northern Region (MP & LP) 2-Central Region (FS, NW, NC)

Across sites between 23% (CR) and 61% (NR) of patients attending specialist treatment centres had **cannabis** as their primary or secondary drug of abuse, compared to between 1%

(NR) and 18% (EC) for the cannabis/**Mandrax** (methaqualone) ‘white-pipe’ combination. In 2008b the proportion of treatment admissions with cannabis as a primary drug increased slightly in the WC when compared to the previous period. In the NR cannabis is reported as primary substance of abuse by 64% of patients who are younger than 20 years. Treatment admissions for Mandrax remain fairly low in all sites, although increasing again slightly in the EC (to 9%) compared to a low of 4% in the previous period.

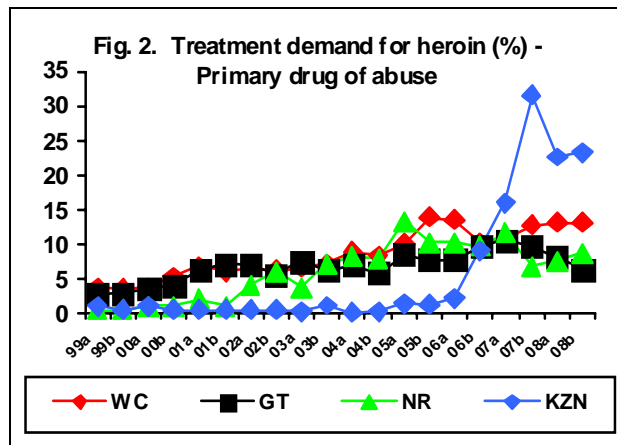
Treatment admissions for **cocaine**-related problems had shown an increase over the past few reporting periods in a number of sites, but seemed to be stabilising or declining in the second half of 2008 (Fig. 1). Between 11% (CR, NR, WC) and 25% (EC) of patients in treatment have cocaine as a primary or secondary drug of abuse. The proportion in the EC remains alarmingly high, despite a slight decline from the previous two periods. Relatively few patients younger than 20 years are admitted for cocaine-related problems, ranging between 1% (KZN) and 6% (EC), of all adolescent patients admitted from July - December 2008.



Treatment admissions for **heroin** as a primary drug of abuse remained fairly stable in all sites, and declined slightly in GT (Fig. 2). In KZN 26% and in the NR 19% of patients had heroin as a primary or secondary drug of abuse. The high proportion in KZN is particularly ascribed to the use of ‘Sugars’ (a low quality heroin and cocaine mix) among young, Indian males in South Durban. Mostly heroin is smoked, but of patients with heroin as their primary drug of abuse in WC, GT and NR, 11%, 37% and 16% respectively report injection use. Three patients in KZN reported injecting heroin. Injection use of heroin has remained stable in the WC, but increased again in GT (from 24% in 2008a) and the NR (from 10% in 2008a).

* We also acknowledge the input of our provincial coordinators and participating treatment centres

The proportion of heroin patients who were Black/African remained at about 1/3 in GT and increased further to 60% in the NR. In GT 46% of heroin patients younger than 20 years were Black/African (down from 75% in 2007b). While the proportion of patients who report heroin as their primary drug remained below 10% in the NR, a relatively large proportion (9%) reported heroin as a secondary drug of abuse.



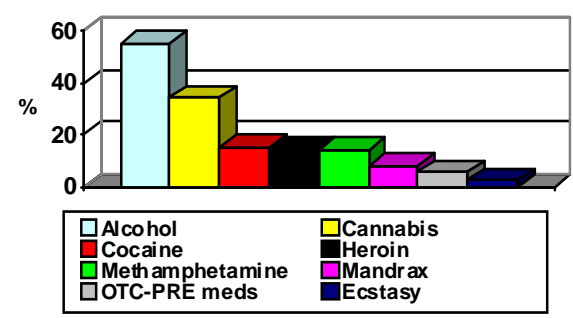
Club drugs and methamphetamine (MA) - Treatment admissions for Ecstasy, LSD or MA as primary drugs of abuse are low except in Cape Town. Across sites only 1% to 4% of patients had Ecstasy as a primary or secondary drug of abuse. MA (aka 'Tik') remained the most common primary drug reported by patients in Cape Town in 2008b, however the proportion remained stable at 35%. Among patients under 20 years the proportion reporting MA as a primary or secondary substance of abuse decreased to 52% (compared to 60% in 2008a), and remained lower than the over 70% recorded in 2006 and the first half of 2007. However two thirds of patients in treatment for MA are younger than 25 years. Treatment admissions related to MA use as a primary or secondary drug remain low in other sites, with between 0.1% (KZN) and 9% (EC) reporting MA as a primary or secondary drug in 2008b. The majority of patients reporting MA in the EC travelled to this province for treatment from the WC.

The abuse of **over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medicines** such as slimming tablets, analgesics, and benzodiazepines (e.g. diazepam and flunitrazepam) continues to be an issue across sites. Treatment admissions as a primary or secondary drug of abuse were between 1% (KZN) and 10% (EC). **Inhalant/solvent** use among young persons continues to be an issue across sites, although the number of patients reporting inhalants as their primary drug is low. **Methcathinone** ('CAT') use was noted in most sites, especially in GT where 6% of patients had 'CAT' as a primary or secondary drug of abuse. **Poly-substance abuse** remains high, with between 29% (CR) and 44% (EC) of patients indicating more than one substance of abuse.

Other key findings

The **proportion of patients under 20 years** ranged from 15% (CR) to 26% (KZN). In all sites the **proportion of Black /African patients in treatment** is still substantially less than would be expected from the underlying population demographics, however these proportions have increased among young patients in GT and MP specifically over time. In the NR 76% and in GT 65% of patients younger than 20 years were Black/African in 2008b. An overall picture of drug treatment admissions in South Africa based on information combined over the 66 treatment centres in 9 provinces is given in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Tx demand data based on data from 9 provinces (primary+secondary drugs): 2008b



Between 18% (KZN) and 30% (GT) of patients reported that they had been **tested for HIV** in the past 12 months, while overall 10% of patients declined to answer this question. Data was also not collected from 9% of the 9479 patients. It is perhaps concerning that the province with the highest HIV prevalence rates has recorded the lowest positive responses to this question during the first and second half of 2008.

Selected implications for policy/practice

- Prioritise treatment for substance abusing mothers with small children, adolescent females on waiting lists and, in general, take active steps to address barriers to treatment faced by women.
- Address the gaps in inpatient treatment services for persons living in traditionally Black African communities. This includes encouraging more Black African social workers and other health professionals to enter the addictions field and receive appropriate training.
- Intensify efforts to prevent the spread of heroin use among black African populations in Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Selected issues to monitor

- The decrease in referrals from doctors and other health professionals in Cape Town.
- The increase in referrals from employers in Gauteng and the Northern region.
- The use of cocaine by persons under 20 years in Cape Town.
- Use of heroin in Limpopo and associated treatment demand.

Selected topics for further research

- Comparison of gender differences in drug treatment demand with drug use patterns in the general population.
- Longitudinal research to look at the link between time in treatment (completed treatment) and the issue of multiple treatment episodes.
- Rapid assessment of the nature and extent of the abuse of antiretroviral medications.

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