Beyond Heroin

Patterns of drug choice diversity among People Who Inject Drugs in three Indian states: Findings from the Hridaya baseline study

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Background
Injecting drug use has emerged as an important route for HIV transmission in India. The Government of India currently estimates that there are approximately 200,000 People Who Inject Drugs (PWID or IDUs) in India (NACO, 2010). Some studies indicate the numbers could be much higher. Surveillance shows HIV prevalence among PWID at 9.2% (NACO, 2010).

Methods
A quantitative cross-sectional baseline survey was conducted with PWID in three states (Delhi, Manipur and Haryana). The highest levels of reported opiate overdoses in last 12 months were in Delhi (7.8%), followed by 4.6% in Sonipat and 2.7% in Imphal. Respondents included both men and women above 18 years of age who had injected drugs in the previous three months.

Results
Covering a range of topics relevant to PWID in India, the Hridaya baseline survey asked specific questions about drug use patterns, including substance choice.

• The mean age of the respondents was 32 years.
• 59% of respondents in Delhi were unmarried, whereas a similar percentage in Imphal was educated up to high school or more.
• A majority of respondents lived on streets, special homes or railway platforms in Delhi (72.9%) and Imphal (73%), while in Sonipat more than 94% stayed in their own homes.
• A majority of PWID were economically disabiliised. 16% in Delhi were rag pickers, day labourers & hawkers. In Imphal, more than one-fourth were unemployed.
• Family support is lacking. Overall, 43.7% felt only partial support from their families; 20% got no support and 15.8% had been deserted by their families.

Mean drug use duration varied from 10.9 years in Imphal to 7.8 years in Delhi and 6.3 years in Sonipat.

In the previous 30 days, 32% of all respondents had injected daily, and 33% at least once a week. [See Graph 1 for data by site.]

• 98.5% of respondents inject opioids: 50.8% heroin; 2.7% liquid opium; 51.1% pharmaceuticals; and 18.6% buprenorphine.
• 35% inject more than one drug, and 19% inject a ‘cocktail’ of drugs. A few respondents (2.2%) reported the injection of sedatives.

• In Manipur, 100% of respondents use heroin predominantly due to its availability. In comparison, 100% of respondents from Haryana indicated predominant use of pharmaceuticals, while respondents from Delhi indicated use of both pharmaceuticals (52.5%) and buprenorphine (47.5%). [See Graph 2.]

• 72% of PWID in Delhi use a pharmaceutical cocktail (Diazepam/Avil/Calmpose), while 18% inject Adnock.

Conclusions
The type of drugs used by PWID varied beyond heroin, particularly outside Manipur. In addition to opiates, pharmaceutical drugs, often in cocktail, are popular. Region-specific interventions are needed to address variations in drug use patterns and diversification of drug choice among PWID in India. PWID and healthcare providers need new skills and training to respond to overdose and other health issues resulting from the injection of pharmaceuticals.

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