

EDITORIAL

SOCIAL DRUGS - AN OVERVIEW

There is a class of drugs commonly referred to as 'social drugs'. These are non-medical agents that are used in social, ritual and cultural gatherings to facilitate easy interpersonal communication or to just bring about relaxation. Nearly all of them act on the central nervous system and induce euphoria or a pleasant sensation. Their continued use often leads to mild or moderate psychological dependence. All of them are derived from plants and were known to indigenous people long before their chemical and pharmacological properties were elucidated. The term 'social pharmacology' has been used to indicate those aspects of pharmacology devoted to their study.

Among the well-known social drugs are cannabis, coca bush, caffeine containing plants (coffee, tea, mate, guarana, yopa and cola), peyote, kava, pituri, betel nut, nutmeg, kohoba, iboga, tobacco, khat and a multiplicity of ethanol-containing beverages. Opium could also be included in this list but this is debatable.

Because of their tendency to cause psychic dependence, many of these drugs are controlled through International Conventions to curb use and distribution across national borders. Among those considered mild and therefore not subject to the controls of these conventions are ethanol-containing drinks, tobacco (cigarettes) and caffeine-containing substances. There is a clear distinction between the use of social drugs in their natural forms and the use of pure substances extracted from the plants. For example both 'cathinone' and 'cathine' derived from khat (*Catha edulis*) are controlled through the Psychotropic Substances Convention while the fresh khat material is exempt from such control. This distinction is not an oversight since in the case of morphine, cocaine and tetrahydrocannabinol, the raw materials opium poppy, coca bush and cannabis, respectively, are controlled through International Conventions.

Categorization of drug use as 'social' or 'antisocial' is only meaningful when put in the proper context. The use of cannabis was not controversial until the early 1960's when it became the trademark of 'hippies' who adopted antisocial tactics to draw attention to their protest against the Vietnam War presumably because all other legitimate avenues had been blocked. Even at present, there is a debate as to whether moderate use of cannabis translates into antisocial behavior.

Control of social drugs takes different forms at national and international level. For example both ethanol-containing drinks and tobacco products are controlled through restricted advertisements, warnings regarding indiscriminate use as well as quality specifications. In the case of the fresh khat material, there is legislation against its use in such countries as the USA and Great Britain.

Use of social drugs must, of necessity, show cultural and geographical bias because people will use what is readily available to them. For example, the root of the pepper plant, *Piper methysticum*, has been used to make a ceremonial drink called 'kava' by the Polynesians of the South Pacific islands and no other community outside this region is known to use it. Similarly the use of peyote and the coca bush is confined to the indigenous people of Mexico and the Andean mountains respectively.

Ethanol-containing beverages are the subject of two articles in this issue of the journal. Mwambete *et al.* has documented the microbial quality of traditional alcoholic beverages in Dar es Salaam. Another article by Onyesom *et al.* has documented the socio-economic and health challenges elicited by 'Ozu' consumption in Ikaland, Nigeria. Ethanol-containing beverages are obtained by the fermentation of carbohydrate rich foods such as cereals, plant juices, honey and fruits. More potent alcoholic drinks are obtained from the distillation of fermented mixtures in which the ethanol content rarely exceeds 10 %. The real concern is that there are no accepted standards for

the raw materials used as well as for the production process. In many African countries, the brewing of these beverages is controlled through extrajudicial restrictions often enforced selectively. Consequently, their preparation is done clandestinely under unhygienic conditions, often in rusted drums away from the prying eyes of local administrators. It is also common to add drugs, formalin, industrial spirit and rectified spirit to 'fortify' the drink. Occasionally methanol has been added inadvertently leading to high morbidity and mortality. In other cases, spoilt maize contaminated with aflatoxin has been used as a raw material.

Indiscriminate consumption of alcohol, particularly in urban areas has been associated with criminal activities and broken marriages. The problems associated with alcoholism are a popular topic among sociologists and numerous dissertations and journal articles have been written on this subject.

Editor-in-Chief