

EDITORIAL

DRUG ABUSE

Drug abuse is usually associated with anti-social behaviour. One of the earliest recorded incidence is when the biblical Noah drank too much wine and subsequently exposed his nakedness to his sons, Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9:20-23). Repeated drug abuse has adverse effects on the process of learning, reasoning and solving problems. It lowers ones self esteem while giving the user a false sense of well being. The individual lives in the proverbial "fools paradise".

While drug abuse is generally condemned as undesirable, there is no unanimity as to what constitutes drug abuse and at times it comes down to the question of value judgement. Taking alcohol during cultural ceremonies hardly constitutes drug abuse. Other examples include chewing of khat (*Catha edulis*) by Meru elders during social gatherings, use of Peyote cactus flowers by South American Indians during religious ceremonies and smoking opium (chasing the dragon) by elderly Chinese men as a ritual. Use of narcotics, especially morphine, in terminally ill patients with intractable pain is medically acceptable. More recently, use of Marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*) in terminally ill cancer patients is gaining acceptance in some American States.

Drug abuse came into the lime light in the mid 1960s during the Vietnam war. Young Americans opposed to their country's involvement in the war chose to express their dissent through anti-social behaviour which gave rise to the "hippie culture". Central to this culture was the use of narcotics. Hippies smoked marijuana freely and promoted the practice through musical drug-related coded messages. Some film stars were said to be drug abusers. But what really shocked the American society was the involvement of sons and daughters of prominent personalities such as industrialists, politicians, doctors, professors, etc. This unexpected phenomenon left many parents psychologically devastated. In this confusion, drug abuse highlighted in the news media gained a degree of respectability which it had been denied hitherto. Many of those who chose drug abuse as a medium of protest are now occupying responsible positions in the American society.

One relevant observation which has been made is that publicising the problem through print and electronic media has the unfortunate consequence of "descriminalising" the problem. Young people are very impressionable and if it appears that the practice is widespread and devoid of stigma, they might be tempted to join those already hooked, out of curiosity. Yet it is important to sensitise people on the dangers posed by drugs to the user, his or her family and the society in general. The argument as to whether drug users should be treated as criminals or sick people is set to continue for a long time to come. It is however, important to help those hooked to the problem while discouraging potential drug abusers through a combination of punitive and humane measures. Because of the ramifications inherent in this problem, the international community shares a common destiny and must, therefore, adopt a common strategy in combating drug abuse. To a large extent this has already been done through international conventions, such as the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971 and the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988 etc.

In Kenya, the problem of drug abuse seems to have taken a turn for the worse in the late 1970s. The Narcotic Drug and Psychotropic Substances Control Act, 1994 (Kenya Gazette Supplement No.41) did not address the problem adequately and the emphasis was on punitive measures. In this issue of the Journal, the review article gives an overview of the drug abuse.

Editor-in-Chief