

PADA

Medicines and Drugs on the Job

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Members of the Federation of Professional Bodies, Chamber of Advocates, Federation of Industries and the Caritas Association for Drug Prevention and Action participated at a Forum entitled "Medicines and Drugs on the Job". This forum was organised by the Chamber of Pharmacists on the 16th June 1987, on the occasion of the Commonwealth Pharmacy Day, which commemorated the holding of the first exploratory conference in London of the Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association of which the Chamber of Pharmacists is a full member.

The forum was aimed at all professionals, many of whom are sure to meet the problem of workers or colleagues working under the influence of drugs, at great risk to themselves and their fellow workers.

Indeed it was attended by members of different professions including medical doctors, engineers, accountants, insurance brokers, social workers, medical and pharmacy students, Caritas members and last but not least pharmacists. All those who attended contributed interesting views on this problem and will hopefully, be better off to face it in the future.

The speakers were:

Magistrate Dr. David Scicluna LL.D., who hears all the drug cases on the island except those that involve trafficking of drugs on a large scale;

Dr. Mary Sciberras, M.D., who besides being a family doctor is a founder member of Caritas Association for Drug Prevention and Action and one of the group involved in the setting up of the Detoxification Centre at St. Luke's Hospital;

Mr. Tony Darmanin, Managing Director of F.G.P. Ltd., a director of Prosan and Pace and Darmanin Ltd., and a member of Caritas Core Group.

The Chairperson was Pharmacist Mrs. Mary Ann Sant Fournier, B.Pharm., M.Phil., President of the Chamber of Pharmacists.

Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association (CPA)

After welcoming the participants, Mrs. Sant Fournier explained the *raison d'être* of the CPA which is that of training and maintaining high standards of professional pharmacy in its various fields, which include education, community

practice, distribution of medicines, Hospital Pharmacy. 'Health for all by the year 2000' is a World Health Organisation concept which the CPA readily embraced and it is the present policy of CPA to work with WHO so that the various decisions taken will be eventually implemented by the Health Ministers of the organisations.

Medicines and Drugs

In introducing the topic under discussion, Mrs. Sant Fournier said that the title was carefully chosen to include both 'Medicines' and 'Drugs' in order that the existing confusion be terminated once and for all. She continued that in fact, in 1982, the WHO saw fit to suggest a modification to the standing definition of the word 'DRUG', "a substance that when taken into the living organism may modify one or more of its functions"⁽¹⁾ (1968) to "a drug, in the broadest sense is any Chemical entity or mixture of entities, other than those required for maintenance of normal health, the administration of which alters the biological function and possible structure"⁽²⁾ This modification was proposed to exclude "food, oxygen, water, endocrine substances, etc. in amounts required for normal health"⁽³⁾ but not meant to exclude drugs which are used to regain and maintain normal health.

The word 'drugs' when defined in the narrowest sense immediately brings to mind narcotics or drugs of abuse, but drugs could mean medicine prescribed by the physician for treatment of illness such as antibiotics, steroids, etc., proprietary medicine, household and industrial chemicals, tobacco, alcohol and even tea or coffee since they contain the stimulant caffeine.

These are the 'legal' drugs. Illegal drugs are ones that have been stolen, smuggled into the

country or manufactured or grown without licence. Some illegal drugs are marihuana, heroin, cocaine. It is a criminal offence to process, buy, to sell or to use such drugs. All prescription drugs that are not obtained through the normal channels (i.e. dispensed by a pharmacist on a doctor's prescription) are also illegal.

The problem of drug abuse is as old as civilization but another aspect which could be just as serious is the misuse of medicine. Pharmacists and other health professionals share a great responsibility in preventing drug consumers from turning into drug abusers.

The film 'High on the Job' was then showed, which portrayed several professionals in America who addicted to Cocaine, experienced a gradual deterioration in their professional performance. The message of the film is not in the write off of these professionals, but in providing ways and means for their rehabilitation and return to their former professional place in society.

A discussion on the topic then ensued, with particular emphasis on the problem in Malta. The members of the audience also actively participated in the discussion. A review of the discussion is being presented.

Drugs and medicines on the job

It has been noted that declining work performance and high absenteeism especially on Mondays can be related to alcohol or other drug use. From an opinion poll, it has been found that locally the problem is poly drug. Only a minority (a small percentage) use Cocaine as it is very expensive.

Various problems arise when the employee is a drug addict. He tries to hide the problem from the employer. They find the place of work a good market place for drugs as he is likely to push drugs to his neighbour. Persuasion by fellow employees can be very powerful. One needs to belong in a group and it is extremely difficult to act against it. This is apparent in work groups where peer pressure is very high.

Company policy in Malta. If there is a problem what happens?

In Malta if an employee is suspected that he is under the influence of drugs, he is sent to the company doctor. There is not the set up of social workers and welfare officers. In the case of alcohol abuse, an employee is given three chances

before he is dismissed. Employment can be terminated as his addiction affects his performance and relationship with friends at work and management.

What happens when certain employees are taking Diazepam as prescribed by the doctor or are taking antihistamines or cough preparations? Motor incoordination and impairment of ability to operate machinery may also be considered a form of behavioural toxicity. Are we going to stop the employee from operating machinery and give him alternative work?

Detection

Sniffer dogs can be used to detect the presence of drugs on the premises. But these spot checks with sniffer dogs can cause embarrassment and friction between employee and management.

Work scanning programmes have been developed abroad. These programmes are based on the premise of using simple routine procedures to screen employees. Screening procedures involve the use of laboratory tests to detect drug levels in urine and blood. Persons so identified are then assessed further to determine the nature and extent of drug-related problems and appropriate interventions to be adopted.

Such early intervention before severe physical, mental and social damage has occurred decreases the risk of more severe long term problems. It has been demonstrated that screening can be a cost efficient approach.

Drug free status as a condition of work: Should a prospective employee be screened for drugs? A person interviewed for a job can undergo laboratory tests to make sure he is drug free. These tests can be made part of the necessary entry requirements.

Local situation

Is it a good idea that the contract of work authorises the management to have the employees screened for drugs? What are the employer's legal rights? It is best to think of safety at work first and foremost so as to safeguard other people's lives. If these screening tests are not included in the contract of work it is advisable for the management to go ahead and carry them out as it will be too late to wait until some accident happens. In Malta no statistical studies have been carried out on what causes accidents on the job and their frequency.

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not change, we may be allowed to ask:- What happened after the issue of this decree of 1757? In other words, did the Treasury succeed in ensuring that sick crews were provided with an adequate and genuine supply of medicaments; that the new arrangements were sufficiently fool-proof so that the Treasury was not cheated by some clever stratagem conceived by some ingenious official aiming at lining his own pocket at public expense?

References:

1. Cassar, P. Medical History of Malta, London, 1965, pp. 118-131.
Cassar, P. *Il chirurgo di bordo della marina dell'Ordine di S Giovanni di Gerusalemme, di Rodi e di Malta, Pagine di storia della medicina*, 1973, Anno XVII, pp. 27-35.
2. Cassar, P. Medical History of Malta, London, 1965, p. 119.
Cutajar, D & Cassar, G. Malta's Role in Mediterranean Affairs 1530-1699, Mid-Med Bank Ltd., Reports & Accounts 1984, Malta, 1985, p. 66.
3. Cassar, P. Medical History of Malta, London, 1965, p. 41.
4. Archive 654, fol. 220, National Library of Malta, Valletta.
5. *Ibidem*, fol. 221 v.

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Impaired Professionals

Professionals are no different from any other part of our society and therefore, one can expect that some of our colleagues would fall prey to drug dependency.

An impaired professional is one who is chemically dependent upon drugs, alcohol or both to such an extent that the usage of such substances interferes with his ability to practice optimally.

In the U.S.A. medicine has dealt with the problem of impaired physicians rather openly for a number of years. Perhaps this is due to the recognition of the life and death nature of some medical and surgical procedures. Whatever the cause, it has been heralded as a big step in the right direction. As seen from the film 'High on the Job' made in 1982, a policy has been adopted that supported and encouraged the development of special programmes to counsel, refer, treat and rehabilitate professionals who are dependent on alcohol and on other drugs.

Detecting impaired professionals. All professionals should be more candid and forthright in confronting their peers and colleagues when their behaviour suggests the possibility of a drug/alcohol abuse. We do our profession, our colleagues and their clients no favour by pretending not to see which is prevalent today. At present we can be reasonable optimistic about the recovery of impaired professionals.

All those present agreed that these policies should be adopted:

1. Screening programmes to be done routinely on all employees starting from the managerial level downwards as everyone is liable to drug abuse. (It is unacceptable to screen lower grades only).
2. For screening to be carried out, one must legislate. Just as abroad breathalisers have been accepted by drivers on the road to test their alcohol intake, so will in future drug screening programmes on the job be accepted and carried out routinely. (It is a wonder that notwithstanding the number of road accidents, breathalisers have not been introduced in Malta).
3. Persons who are found to be under the influence of drugs are made to undergo detoxification and attend a rehabilitation centre. Ideally the person should be granted sick leave. He will then proceed to a half way house, with others of the same social background or same profession to undergo group therapy. No disciplinary measures should be taken.
4. It is important that an efficient system is planned in advance and that it is maintained, otherwise early intervention does not occur.

Conclusion

There was a general consensus that legislation should be enacted to make mandatory drug-testing legal and that jobs should require drug free status as a condition of employment. Professionals should take the lead in this area.

References:

1. Nomenclature and Classification of Drug- and Alcohol- related Problems: A Shortened Version of a W.H.O. Memorandum, British Journal of Addiction 77 (1982) p. 6.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*