



EMCDDA DOCUMENTATION CENTRE INFORMATION BULLETIN

CORONAVIRUS, 14 May 2021

GREY LITERATURE

Statement of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of Member States' joint commitments to address and counter all aspects of the world drug problem

Commission on Narcotic Drugs
Vienna: 2021

The Commission adopted by consensus a joint statement on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of Member States' joint commitments to address and counter all aspects of the world drug problem.

The joint statement expresses grave concern about the devastating impact of the pandemic across the world, and outlines new challenges, good practices and actions to take in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The statement also highlights new trends, challenges and obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic; recognizing that due to the nature of the pandemic the traditional demand reduction infrastructure faced increasing challenges in providing drug-related services, potentially affecting drug treatment and health services; and noting that people with drug use disorders, including those incarcerated, may be at increased risk of more severe illness and mortality from COVID-19;

<https://undocs.org/E/CN.7/2021/L.2>

A geographically distinct case of fatal methanol toxicity from ingestion of a contaminated hand sanitizer product during the COVID-19 pandemic

Overbeek, D L; Watson, C J; Castaneda, N R; Ganetsky, M
Journal of Medical Toxicology
17, 2, p.218-221, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered outbreaks of unanticipated toxicities, including methanol toxicity. Multiple methanol outbreaks have been described, including contaminated hand sanitizer in the southwest USA. In this case, we describe a fatal case of methanol toxicity from hand sanitizer ingestion, geographically separated from the outbreak in the southwest USA and prior to the announcement of nationwide warnings by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The product was identified as one later recalled by the FDA for methanol contamination. Additionally, the consumption in this case was related to a desire to conceal alcohol consumption from family members. This case of methanol toxicity should increase awareness of the ease of which contaminated products can be widely distributed and of the use of alternative ethanol-containing products to obscure relapse in alcohol use disorder.

Post-COVID syndrome: Need to include risk of addiction in research and multi-disciplinary clinical work

Hakansson, A
Psychiatry Research, 2021, 301, 113961

The rise of illicit fentanyl, stimulants and the fourth wave of the opioid overdose crisis

Ciccarone, D
Current Opinion in Psychiatry
6 May 2021
doi: 10.1097/YCO.0000000000000717

Purpose of review:

This review provides an update on recently published literature on the rise of illicit fentanyl, risks for overdose, combinations with other substances, e.g. stimulants, consequences, and treatment.

Recent findings:

Overdose due to illicit synthetic opioids (e.g. fentanyl and fentanyl analogs) continues to rise in the US both preceding and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fentanyl-related overdose is rising in new geographic areas e.g. the western USA. Stimulant-related overdose is also increasing nationwide driven by methamphetamine and cocaine. Polysubstance use, e.g. the use of a stimulant along with an opioid is driving stimulant-related overdose. Other medical consequences of injection drug use are rising including HIV and hepatitis C infections. Medication approaches to treating opioid use disorder remain the standard of care and there are new promising pharmacological approaches to treating methamphetamine use disorder.

Summary:

A 'fourth wave' of high mortality involving methamphetamine and cocaine use has been gathering force in the USA. Availability and use of illicit fentanyl are still the major drivers of overdose deaths and the current rise in stimulant-related deaths appears entwined with the ongoing opioid epidemic.

Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on individuals under treatment for substance use disorders:

Risk factors for adverse mental health outcomes

Bliethikioti, C; Nuño, L, Paniello, B; et al
Journal of Psychiatric Research
8 May 2021
DOI: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.05.006

Background

Individuals with Substance Use Disorders (SUD), are vulnerable to the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the first study to assess risk factors of adverse mental health outcomes during lockdown in a SUD population.

Methods

This was a cross-sectional study, conducted through an online survey that was completed by 303 individuals with SUD, attended in the Addiction Unit of University of Barcelona Clínic Hospital. Sociodemographic and clinical data were collected and descriptive analyses were carried out.

Depending on whether individuals reported a worsening or no change/improvement in anxiety and depression symptoms during lockdown, the sample was divided in two groups. A logistic regression was then carried out to identify risk factors associated with adverse mental health outcomes.

Results

Overall, frequency of use for the majority of individuals with SUD remained stable during lockdown in comparison to the pre-lockdown era, although a reduction was found in frequency of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and cocaine use in a small fraction of individuals with SUD. Symptoms of clinical anxiety were found in 58.7% of the sample while 48.2% of participants scored above the clinical threshold for depression. In addition, 50.3% of the sample reported a deterioration in depression and anxiety symptoms during lockdown that was associated with the following risk factors: previous trauma-exposure, female gender, distress and isolation, income reduction and alcohol use.

Conclusion

A high percentage of patients with SUD experienced adverse mental health outcomes during lockdown that were associated with several risk factors, which should be taken into account in policy making and prevention strategies, as well as in clinical practice, in order to provide personalized care to SUD patients during the time of the pandemic.

Availability of illegal drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Western Germany

Scherbaum N, Bonnet U, Hafermann H, et al
Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2021, 12, 648273

Background:

In response to the COVID-19-pandemic, a lockdown was established in the middle of March 2020 by the German Federal Government resulting in drastic reduction of private and professional traveling in and out of Germany with a reduction of social contacts in public areas.

Research Questions:

We seek evidence on whether the lockdown has led to a reduced availability of illegal drugs and whether subjects with substance-related problems tried to cope with possible drug availability issues by increasingly obtaining drugs via the internet, replacing their preferred illegal drug with novel psychoactive substances, including new synthetic opioids (NSO), and/or by seeking drug treatment.

Methods:

A questionnaire was anonymously filled in by subjects with substance-related disorders, typically attending low-threshold settings, drug consumption facilities, and inpatient detoxification wards from a range of locations in the Western part of Germany. Participants had to both identify their main drug of abuse and to answer questions regarding its availability, price, quality, and routes of acquisition.

Results:

Data were obtained from 362 participants. The most frequent main substances of abuse were cannabis (n = 109), heroin (n = 103), and cocaine (n = 75). A minority of participants reported decreased availability (8.4%), increased price (14.4%), or decreased quality (28.3%) of their main drug. About 81% reported no change in their drug consumption due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. A shift to the use of novel psychoactive substances including NSO were reported only by single subjects. Only 1-2% of the participants obtained their main drug via the web.

Discussion:

Present findings may suggest that recent pandemic-related imposed restrictions may have not been able to substantially influence either acquisition or consumption of drugs within the context of polydrug users (including opiates) attending a range of addiction services in Germany.

Health literacy and changes in pattern of drug use among participants at the Stockholm Needle Exchange Program during the COVID-19 pandemic

Lindqvist, K, Wallmofeldt, C, Holmén, E, et al
Harm Reduction Journal, 2021, 18, 1, 52

Background and Aims:

People who inject drugs may be particularly vulnerable to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) due to underlying health problems, stigma and social vulnerabilities. Harm reduction services, including needle exchange programs (NEP), have been subjected to varying degrees of disruption in the world, especially in the beginning of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Compared to responses in other countries, Sweden's initial strategy toward limiting the spread and impact of COVID-19 was less restrictive to its citizens with no imposed general societal lockdown. In this study, we investigate changes in drug use patterns, utilization of NEP associated health services, COVID-19 health literacy and the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies among NEP clients in Stockholm during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods:

NEP visits and services provided (needles/syringes, HIV and hepatitis C tests and treatment, naloxone distributed) and overall mortality among NEP clients between January 1 and October 31, 2020, were used for trend analyses in comparison with corresponding 2019 data. Between July 27 and October 2, 2020, NEP clients (n = 232) responded to a 27 item COVID-19 Health Literacy Questionnaire. SARS CoV-2 IgG antibody tests (n = 779) were performed between June 15 and October 31, 2020.

Results:

During the COVID-19 pandemic number of clients, client visits, naloxone distribution and HCV tests remained stable compared to 2019, while distribution of needles/syringes increased ($p < 0.0001$); number of HIV tests and HCV treatments decreased ($p < 0.05$); and mortality decreased (< 0.01). Overall, the level of health literacy concerning transmission routes and protective measures was high. SARS-CoV-2 antibody prevalence was 5.4% (95% CI 4.0-7.2).

Conclusions:

The Stockholm NEP managed to maintain a high level of clients and services during the pandemic. In general, COVID-19 health literacy was adequate and the overall SARS-CoV-2 antibody prevalence was low compared to the general population, which highlights a need for prioritized and targeted COVID-19 vaccination among PWID.

COVID-19: focus on substance use and stigma

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2021/05/covid-19-focus-on-substance-use-and-stigma.html>