

A bottle and a bag of weed

Substance abuse trends in KwaZulu-Natal

An alcohol and other drug (AOD) surveillance system shows a significant increase in the number of young black people seeking treatment for substance abuse in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) from 2008 to 2010, raising serious health concerns. Initiated in 1996, the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (SACENDU), collects alcohol and other drug use (AOD) surveillance data in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces, monitors trends and consequences of substance abuse on a six-monthly basis, using information obtained from specialist treatment centres within each province. **MOHAMMED YACOOB VAWDA** and **ARVIN BHANA** analysed the KZN findings.

A key advantage of the surveillance system is the ability to determine trends at a local level, which might have application for an evidence-based approach to national policy creation. In addition, treatment centre surveillance data assists in monitoring the extent to which new substance abuse trends are emerging, as well as among particular age and gender cohorts. The data collected from these treatment centres over the last three years was analysed to provide an overview of the trends of abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

FINDINGS

The number of individuals seeking treatment for substance abuse in KwaZulu-Natal ranged from a high of 3 123 in 2008, to 2 815 in 2009, to a low of 1 849 in 2010.

Figure 1 highlights the distribution of treatment over racial categories, which indicates that the proportion of black individuals who received treatment for substance abuse versus other categories has increased. The number of black people receiving treatment for substance abuse significantly increased over the three-year period, from 46 % for July to De-

cember 2008, to 58 % for July to December 2010.

Given that this is surveillance data, it is not possible to draw any conclusions about this increase, save to say that more black people are accessing treatment. Nevertheless, the extent of substance abuse is of concern. With regard to age categories, age groups 15 to 25 have the highest incidence rates of treatment of substance abuse in comparison to all other age groups.

Apart from alcohol, the study found that cannabis (dagga), followed by heroin and opiates, crack and cocaine, as well as tobacco are also commonly used substances.

Black people seeking treatment have the highest rates of alcohol and cannabis abuse, whilst Indian and coloured people have the highest rates of abuse for crack and cocaine. Among whites the most common substances of abuse are cannabis, alcohol and crack and cocaine. Cannabis abuse is most common (51%) for the 10- to 19-year age group, followed by alcohol (15%) and heroin (8%). Among 20- to 24-year-olds, alcohol (27%) and cannabis (32%) abuse rates were common. Drug abuse among young people is not specific to any population group.

Rates of treatment in terms of employment status and gender over the past three years highlight the fact that students and people who were unemployed had the lowest rates of treatment. In terms of gender distribution, males were shown to have higher rates of treatment than females. Employed people were more likely to seek treatment than those not employed.

The trend of alcohol abuse stabilises between 35 and 38 years while crack and cocaine is primarily abused by people aged between 27 and 31.

The trend for cannabis abuse stabilises between the ages of 21 and 23, in comparison to the prescription drug addiction trend that tends to be more common in older age groups (35 to 40).^{*} With regard to the total number of individuals and their choice of primary substance of abuse, the trend has been consistent over the past three years.

Figure 2 illustrates that alcohol has the highest rates of most commonly abused substances, followed by cannabis.

The number of people who seek treatment for crack, cocaine or ecstasy is relatively small compared to other commonly used substances.

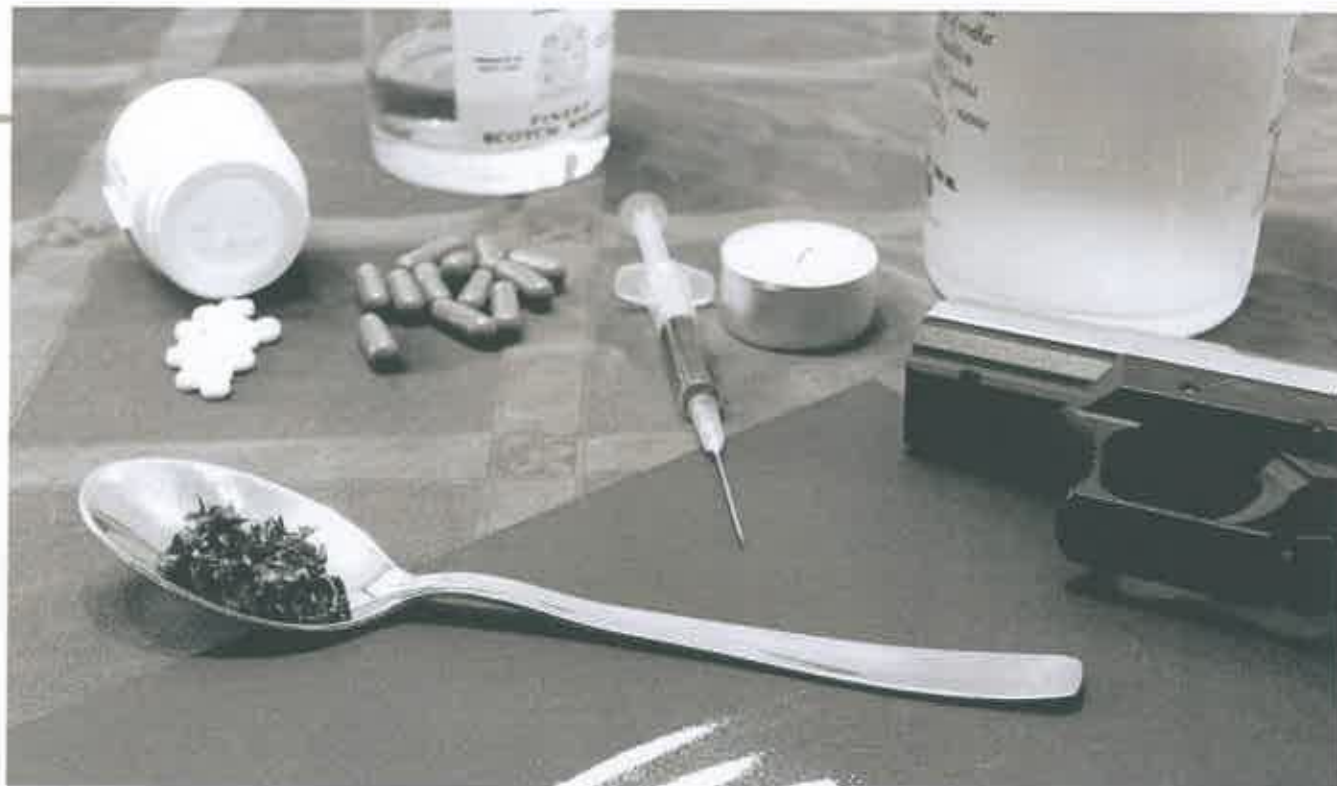


Figure 1: Distribution of treatment over population categories over a three-year period (%)

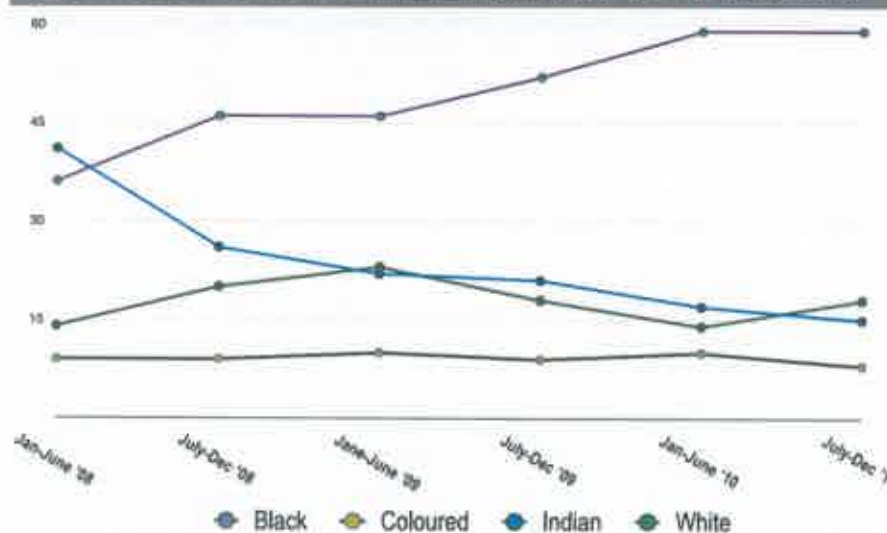
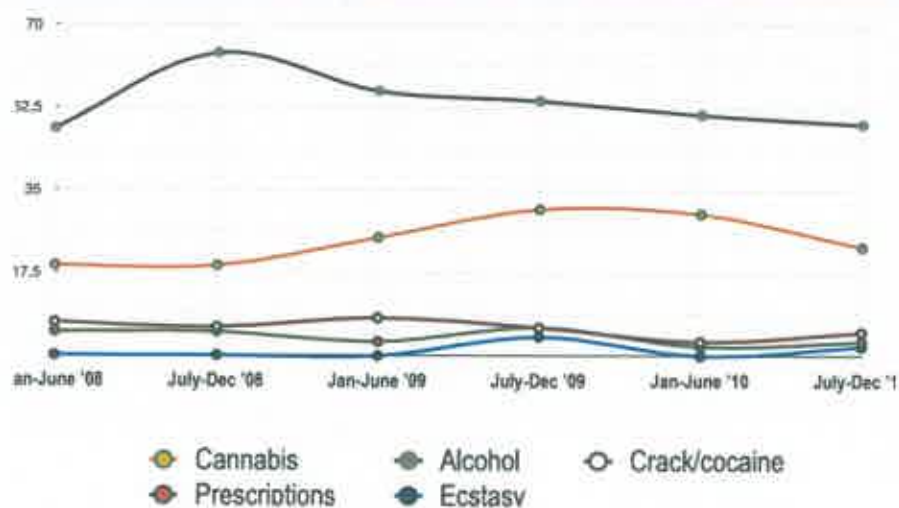


Figure 2: Rates of commonly used drugs over a three-year period (%)



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Alcohol remains the most common substance of abuse among older people, and cannabis the most common among younger individuals. While many in treatment admit to one or other substance of abuse, most individuals tend to abuse multiple substances. The relative youthfulness of the population seeking treatment potentially represents a public health concern that requires serious attention. ◀ ◀

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[*Reliable data for prescription drug abuse was not available for 2010.]



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Volume 10 no. 1 • March 2012

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