

Students involved in politics indulge more in drug abuse

40pc either smoke or are addicted, survey says

By Ripon Baig

More than 40 percent of the residential students studying in higher educational institutions in Dhaka city are habituated to tobacco and addicted to various types of drugs including cannabis, sleeping pills and phensidyl.

This was revealed in a year-long survey conducted by a non-government organisation (NGO) under the programme 'Prevalence and patterns of substance abuse among residential students of higher educational institutions in Dhaka city'.

The anti-drug organisation, LIFE that conducted the survey also found that among the addicted students, the percentage of males is alarmingly higher

at 55.2 while female addicts are 7.6. The survey was done by Dr. Rejuan Hossain Bhuiyan, Assistant Professor of Geography and Environment at Dhaka University. Dr. Abul Hasnat Milton, general secretary of LIFE and public health epidemiologist and Dr. Muhibul Abrar, technical officer, quality assurance of Pathfinder International — an international NGO.

There are 32 male hostels and 12 female hostels in Dhaka city and the total number of student residents is 20,681. The investigators conducted their survey in all the residential halls and detected that those aged 20-23 years are more in-

involved in substance abuse.

"This is the age in when substance abuse is found to be more prevalent among the youth population in countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal and Canada," Dr. Milton said in the report. The typical vitality of youth culture, low exposure to majority norms and better ability to experiment an innovative life style are the important factors in this age group that makes them pick up tobacco smoking and get addicted to several drugs. Dr Milton, further noted.

Tobacco is the most commonly used substance in the residential halls. More than 55

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percent male and 7.69 percent female students smoke regularly. Tobacco is considered harmless regarding abuse and dependence potential and they take a liberal attitude about using it, Dr. Milton said.

After tobacco the most commonly abused drug is alcohol. 13.73 percent male and 3.07 percent female students drink alcohol, the study found. The study also reported that locally brewed alcoholic beverages are available in increasing amount and 'it is not very difficult to obtain it.' The students drink alcohol on different occasions, Dr. Milton observed.

Other commonly used drugs are cannabis, sleeping pills and phensidyl. Cannabis derivatives include cannabis, *bhang*, *charas*, hemp leaves are particularly popular. In this study 11.04 percent of male and 1.53 percent females were found to use cannabis, *charas* or *bhang*. Though cannabis cultivation is prohibited in the country now, it is quite easily available and relatively cheap. In general, cannabis gives a temporary sense of well being and relaxation. It may reduce anxiety and emotional tension and the subject may feel themselves capable of performing extraordinary physical and mental feats.

Tranquilisers and hypnotics are available over the counter (OTC) and students frequently use them as sleeping pills and the percentage among males is 10.44 and females 5.38, Dr. Milton informed. Many of them may have been introduced to these substances by their physicians during their illness. Later experience with these drugs and their effect in relieving stress and tension lead many to ignore professional advice on the dangers of uncontrolled and habitual use and they 'try to obtain the drugs from other sources', the survey revealed.

Phensidyl has emerged in recent years as the most prominent substance of abuse. In this study 7.46 percent male and 1.76 percent females are found

to abuse phensidyl. The advantage with phensidyl use is, it is not easy to detect any phensidyl abuser by looking at the subject and the students find it safe because of this.

However, prevalence of heroin abuse has come down. Only 0.29 percent ever used heroin. The cause behind this, according to Dr. Milton was, 'Students are well aware of this side effects of heroin now as compared to earlier days.'

The survey also found that the students who are involved in politics indulge more in substance abuse and the percentage is 40.45.

It was found through the study that a large number of students — 23.87 percent abusers belonged to families where the father completed graduation and 13.33 percent abusers had graduate mothers. Thus the parents' education level is positively related to drug abuse.

It was also noted that majority of the substance abusers reported being influenced by the media. Curiosity is also found to be a common motive among abusers and the percentage is 22.05. 15.36 percent of the abusers, first abuse substances being influenced by their peer group. Learning from seniors by seeing and being offered by them is also common in hostels. 5.13 percent of the abusers in this study first experienced substance abuse from seniors.

Dr. Milton said, 'The overall situation is quite alarming and immediate measures should be taken to combat this. If appropriate steps both at government and non-government level are not initiated at this stage, very soon it may reach alarming proportions and the price both in terms of economic and social cost may be too high for the nation to bear'.

Since a large number of residential students are involved in politics and social-cultural activities, students' political organisations and other social-cultural organisations may launch anti-drug programmes, he added.