

Poor regulation pushes up number of OTC drug addicts

Accessibility, affordability, lack of adequate drug inspectors are attributed as reasons

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BANGALORE: There is a steady increase in the number of victims falling prey to addictive drugs sold over the counter (OTC) every year in the City.

According to the records available in the last three years from a few de-addiction centres in the City, there has been a 20 per cent rise in the number of outpatients and 10 per cent rise in the number of in-patients, who are addicted to OTC drugs.

At the Nimhans de-addiction centre, the number of patients addicted for opioid-derivatives, codeine, including injectable drugs, is on the rise.

Dr Prathima Murthy, professor of Psychiatry and chief of De-addiction Services at Nimhans, says that a few years ago a detailed report on the addiction scenario of Bangalore City was submitted to the Drug Controller as well as the police, but no action was taken. Many private de-addiction centres too are seeing a large number of patients between 18 and 25 years, who are addicts of Schedule H1 drugs.

According to Dr A Jagadish, consultant psychiatrist, Abhaya Neuropsychiatry and Critical Care Hospital, usually addiction among youths begins with a curiosity. The curiosity later develops into a habit due to peer pressure. Very less number of youths are actually addicted due to depression.

"Studies show that easy accessibility and affordability had increased the dependence on addictive drugs. Drugs like opioid-derived painkillers, codeine-based cough syrups, benzodiazepine-based drugs that are used for anxiety disorders, etc, are sold freely over



the counter even today without prescription," he said and added that not just youths, many senior citizens were addicted to sleeping tablets and even doctors and paramedics had easy access to such drugs.

One of the patients, Sumith (name changed), a 28-year-old, former medical representative had easy access to several Schedule H1 drugs at the chemist shops.

He initially started taking cough syrups, and when their prices shot up, he switched to painkillers which were affordable. He has been an OTC addict for more than 10 years and has suffered seizures due to overdose.

Extra bucks

Tejas (name changed), another addict, who is undergoing treatment, said that it was very difficult to curb the euphoric feeling that one enjoys after the consumption of these drugs.

"I used to forge prescriptions to buy these drugs and doctors and pharmacists acknowledged after you paid them extra bucks. A few ward boys in some of the government hos-

What is Schedule H1

Schedule H1 is a class of prescription drugs appearing under the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules introduced in 1945.

These drugs cannot be purchased over the counter without the prescription of a qualified doctor.

The manufacture and sale of all drugs are covered under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act and Rules.

pitals sell them to chemists and buyers for a price," he added.

Lack of manpower

State Drug Controller Raghurama Bhandary says, "We take action against pharmacists by cancelling their license and also by seizing the drugs, whenever a complaint is lodged. But our main constraint is lack of manpower. We are unable to monitor the sale of addictive drugs over the counter, effectively," he said and added that with just 49 drug inspectors, they have to monitor over 21,000 chemists shops in the State.

In Bangalore alone, there are around nine drug inspectors to monitor as many as 7,000 chemists.

With new amendment to the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, brought in by the Government of India, from March 1, 2014, many drugs, including antibiotics, have been brought under Schedule H1. The pharmacists have been asked to maintain a separate register along with the copy of the prescription, while selling these drugs.

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