A Desire to Overcome Addiction - Experiences of Nyaope Users

By Professor Kebogile Mokwena, Nedbank/NRF South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Substance Abuse and Population Mental Health

The most significant challenge involved in attempting to quit nyaope use is the physical pain that occurs when users have not smoked the drug. These are some of the experiences revealed in a study by Professor Kebogile Mokwena, who was recently awarded the Nedbank/NRF South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Substance Abuse and Population Mental Health, at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU).

Nyaope, or whoonga, a novel psychoactive substance (NPS), is a relatively new designer drug made by mixing a number of compounds to effect psychoactive results. Nyaope contains some amounts of heroin to which is added a range of other substances such as methamphetamine, cocaine, paracetamol, caffeine and even medicinal drugs.

The drug is predominantly used by young people of lower socio-economic status in black townships in South Africa. Users can be easily identified by their dazed look, slow movements and unkempt appearance. In addition, users often resort to stealing and selling stolen goods in order to sustain their habit.

Physical health vulnerabilities associated with the drug include being prone to infections because of a compromised immune system and the sharing of needles for those that inject rather than smoke the drug. The interactions of the various drugs in the nyaope cocktail contribute to the extreme physical/physiological dependence on the drug.

Experiences of users of nyaope

The study found that the experiences of the nyaope users are consistent across all areas, and their description of the process of addiction is similar. Nyaope users identified unfavorable social environments which promote initial use and difficulty in quitting, as well as negative views of themselves and their lives due to their use of nyaope, as some of the many challenges they face. The negative views reported were informed by how communities and their families regard the users, and the lack of trust and respect that is brought about by their use.

The study also found that physical pain that occurs when the users have not smoked the drug, was one of the biggest challenges for users attempting to quit nyaope use, as it often contributed to their consistent relapse. Because smoking nyaope temporarily relieves the pain, the research found that it becomes an easier option for users and contributes to a cyclical smoking behaviour. Users described the strength of the addiction as something they don’t have control over and that once they start to use the drug they find it difficult to stop.

A recent, yet to be published biochemical study conducted at SMU, also shows that nyaope use is associated with a range of abnormalities including liver and gonadal dysfunction as well as a range of blood cell count abnormalities. This suggests occult infections, organ dysfunction and possible bone marrow and immune suppression.

Despite the effects of nyaope on the users’ lives, they do not seem to be able to break the habit. On the contrary, researchers found that nyaope users in the study expressed a desire to find assistance in quitting their addiction. The cry for help message was identified from the users, their families and the community.

What can be done?

The study recommends that nyaope users require interventions at different levels, including:

- The mental/psychological,
- The physical pain which result from withdrawals, and
- Societal factors, which include unfavorable social conditions.

While standard rehabilitation programmes typically remove the addicted person from his or her social environment for the stipulated period, this alone has been found to be insufficient for the nyaope addict, as upon return, they often go to the same unfavourable social environment, which promotes a relapse. The research recommends that a customised programme may hold the key to the successful rehabilitation of addicts.

The way forward

Further research into nyaope is currently underway, led by the SARChI Chair in Substance Abuse and Population Mental Health together with various schools at SMU. The studies will look into:

- The effect of nyaope use on sexual function and upper gastro-intestinal tract
- The use of physical activity to improve quality of life of recovering nyaope users
- Radiological and brain function changes
- Impact of nyaope use on the mental status of the users’ families
- The impact of nyaope on children who are perinatally exposed.