
Editorial

Drug and Alcohol Misuse in Malta

The use of alcohol and other drugs in society today has taken a significant twist in that hitherto the problems, related to the misuse and abuse of these substances, were entirely the domain of the professionals involved in the front line. With the advent of the, so called, "permissive society" that, in turn, is fuelled by the increase in material wealth and the need to have it now rather than later, these problems have alas become part and parcel of such a culture and thus of every day living. The media and the political parties have also made important in-roads as far as bringing the problem "out into the open" without necessarily having the answers or the means to address the situation. It is imperative before hastily concocting any half-baked solution to have the necessary information in hand along with the context under which the data was gathered, if one is to tackle a particular facet of the problem in a comprehensive manner.

In the field of jurisdiction, Malta has now acceded to the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. At present a bill is on its way through Parliament to include psychotropics as well as the conventional narcotics. In 1994, The Prevention of Money Laundering Act was passed and in the same year the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance 1939 was also amended to include coerced treatment and a more complete definition of a trafficking offence. These positive changes in the law following those of 1986, in which stiffer penalties for drug traffickers were introduced along with the freezing and forfeiture of assets, are a serious attempt to limit illicit drug trafficking.

It is now apparent that there is a need to introduce laws in relation to the consumption of alcohol under specific circumstances. One may argue that a "Breathalyser Test" shortly to be introduced is the result of the media hype over the visible increase in fatal traffic accidents. However, there has been no research done to date in this area which would uphold this view. In contrast, conclusive data has been drawn from the European School Study on Alcohol and Other Drugs in 26 European countries, which demonstrated that Maltese sixteen-year olds topped the European order of merit when it came to imbibing wine or spirits three times or more during the last thirty days. Malta also figured high up on the list when it came to age (13-year old or younger) at first use of alcohol. In a further study, attempting to clarify at what age our youngsters first drank alcohol, which was conducted

on 9- to 11- year old primary school children, it was found that a significant number of the 400 or so cohort had already imbibed alcohol, mainly wine or beer, procured from home. The recent National Census Study, conducted in 1995, also supports the findings of these two specific studies and provides further evidence that within the population as a whole a number of us Maltese drink more than the recommended WHO directive of 14 units (female) and 21 units (male) of alcohol per week.

There are other situations where it might be prudent to limit the consumption of alcohol, namely, at the place of work. Mark Gauci and Noel Vella, in their article in this issue of Xjenza (see page 24), make a first attempt to establish the attitudes of managers of various industries throughout Malta, towards the use of alcohol and other drugs both on and off the premises. The results of their study have significant implications in the way we approach such problems. Both Caritas and Sedqa, have different programmes to tackle separate aspects of this issue. Caritas mainly involves itself in the preventative and counselling side of things whereas Sedqa, following the results of the Gauci and Vella study, has developed the programme "SAFE" which is based on a similar successful American programme. It is envisaged that further talks with the GWU will result in most companies adopting the programme for the safety of both the staff and management. It would be fruitful, however, if the study could be repeated amongst the staff, this time to assess their attitudes towards the use of these substances at work. It is commendable that the authors, Gauci and Vella, have managed to succeed with this first study and I would like to take this opportunity to recommend that they follow this through with the study suggested above.

Finally, it would be of great advantage to all policy makers and strategists in this field if more similar studies were undertaken. Such studies have the potential of providing specific and detailed information without which any policy document or strategy might not be worth the paper it is written on!

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