

Introduction

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This special issue of the *Bulletin of PAHO* presents a portion of the work of a PAHO expert study group on the health problems stemming from the use of psychoactive substances, as well as the work of other researchers in this field from throughout the Region. These activities are part of the Plan for the Prevention and Control of the Abuse of Psychoactive Substances and Alcohol (1987-1991), established by the Regional Program on Alcoholism and Drug Addiction in keeping with resolutions adopted by the Organization's Governing Bodies. The resolutions recommended the study of risk factors for and causes of drug addiction and the development of a regional information system on the magnitude of the problem.

It is all too clear that the countries were completely unprepared for the rapid and alarming spread of the use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs, since the current gravity of the situation far exceeds the capacity of governments to respond effectively. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen knowledge in this field and promote epidemiologic studies such as those described in the first part of this issue. The papers by Medina-Mora et al., Torres de Galvis and Murrelle, Alfaro, Smart, Aguilar, and Smart and Patterson represent a sample of the research on alcoholism, tobacco

use, and drug abuse that is under way in the countries of the Region.

Another important category of studies includes the works of Ortiz, Kozel, and Míguez. These papers discuss the methodologies used in drug abuse research and point out the necessity of developing alternative epidemiologic surveillance systems, since short-term studies must be combined with the more standard long-term epidemiologic research that is so useful for determining trends and for enabling early case detection. In a similar vein, the paper by Sandí and Avila presents an evaluation of the applicability of the Addiction Severity Index to Costa Rican population groups, a novel type of research that is very important for Latin America.

Obtaining data on the effectiveness of prevention programs is an extremely complex task. Those in charge of this type of research must identify indicators on the basis of rigorous studies of risk factors and personality or environmental factors that promote a drug abuse problem or determine its appearance and evolution. The works of Climent et al. and Florenzano report on research that is related to prevention efforts. Among other questions, these authors seek to determine what prevention strategies are the most effective and toward what groups they should be directed first.

The development of a regional information system on the magnitude and nature of drug addiction requires that more rigorous mechanisms be established for

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the collection of epidemiologic information and that they be adjusted to the necessities and resources of the countries, since up to now the data available from most national registries could enable only partial analysis of the situation. The lack of reliable information is mainly due to underreporting of cases and to the complexity of data that are generated by varied and often unrelated reporting systems, including judicial, police, and health registries, among others.

The second part of this issue presents the results of a first attempt to develop a regional information system. The "Epidemiologic Report on the Use and Abuse of Psychoactive Substances in 16 Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean" constitutes an important effort to create a data bank that can be regularly updated based on available records or the answers to open questionnaires. The information presented has important gaps

and in some cases is inconsistent. To solve these problems, a more precise and structured questionnaire is now being designed. Nevertheless, we thought it would be of great interest to disseminate the preliminary results of this project, which includes information that the governments and nongovernmental agencies have regarding the production, trafficking, and use of psychoactive substances in the 16 countries surveyed, as well as their responses to the situation.

It is an unfortunate fact that policies are often established before research can be done on which to base them. While not expecting to resolve this dilemma, we hope that these efforts at understanding the complex phenomena of tobacco use, alcoholism, and drug abuse will contribute to the dialogue necessary to establish multidisciplinary program priorities in the Region of the Americas.