

# OPINION

## **Substance Abuse: 100% increase in patients at GMC in 3 years**

**Zehru Nissa\***

The number of patients seeking medical intervention at drug de-addiction centre of Government Medical College (GMC) Srinagar has increased by around 100 percent in the past three years, reflecting an alarming rise of substance abuse in Kashmir.

In just eight months, up to August 2017, around 528 patients had been seen in OPD of drug de-addiction centre of the SMHS, the only such hospital-based centre in Kashmir. However, this number is more than double the number of patients that were seen in OPD in 2014. Although that year there was a dip in registration of patients towards the end of the year due to floods, 291 OPD registrations had been made for de-addiction, much lower than what the trend has been in the years that followed.

A senior doctor said over the past few years, there has been a steep rise in the number of people seeking help of healthcare professionals for substance abuse. In 2015, 490 patients were seen in the OPD of de-addiction centre. In 2016 the number grew to 535 patients. This year, in just eight months, the number had already reached the total number of patients seen in the entire 2016.

Psychiatrists believe that the rise in substance abuse in Kashmir was due to “multiple factors” and needed intervention of various stakeholders.

“Abuse of cannabis has been growing over the past few years in Kashmir, may be because of escalating costs of medicinal opioids,” said Dr Arshid Hussain, professor of psychiatry at GMC Srinagar. He however expressed

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concern that once on drugs, experimentation was not uncommon.

The other concern, Dr Yawar H Rather, in-charge of GMC de-addiction centre said, was the growing number of people from rural areas taking to opioids. "Heroin and brown sugar are picking up in villages, small towns. Earlier, this used to be a problem of tourist belts," he said.

He said, currently as many as 90 patients were enrolled for opioid substitution therapy (OST) at GMC Srinagar. This treatment protocol makes de-addiction from heroin and other opioids possible without withdrawal problems and ensures lesser chances of relapse.

The growing numbers, doctors at GMC Srinagar said, was a concern for the society. "Substance abuse is a public health concern because it mostly affects the young productive age group. It cripples their lives, their entire families," Dr Hussain said.

He however, said that de-addiction was not the only step towards eradication of drug menace in Kashmir. "We need to work on awareness, availability, treatment

and rehabilitation. All of this needs to go in tandem," he said.

Doctors at GMC said that education department, police, excise, civil society, NGOs and society, everyone has a role to play. In January 2016, government had announced that a district level assessment of substance abuse would be carried out to devise a better plan for combating it. However, the plan did not take off. This year in June, survivors of substance abuse presented a memorandum to government at GMC Srinagar to de-centralize de-addiction center and have more such facilities in districts. No action was taken on the appeal.

Recently, the Chief Minister's grievance cell, acting upon various pleas by civil society members, convened a meeting with representatives from various departments to "brain storm" on ways to address the menace. An official in the government said that a comprehensive policy on addressing substance abuse was being worked out.

"If the strategy is rolled out and responsibility fixed on stakeholders, it would go a long way in addressing the issue," said the doctor. ■

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