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Illicit drug use and responses in six Pacific Island countries

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Abstract

*We report here on the illicit drug situation in six Pacific nations: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. The report is based on the 'Situational analysis of illicit drug issues and responses in Asia and the Pacific', commissioned by the Australian National Council on Drugs Asia Pacific Drug Issues Committee. The situational analysis was a comprehensive desk-based review; data sources included published and unpublished literature and information from key informants. A range of psychoactive substances have been used traditionally across the Pacific region. Cannabis is the by far the most common and widespread illicit drug used in the six Pacific Islands reviewed. Drugs such as heroin, methamphetamines and cocaine are not used commonly due to their high cost compared to the average income. Currently, there is no overall regional or country-based illicit drug policy for the Pacific and few treatment programs; limited data exist to aid in understanding illicit drug use and the harms associated with its use in the Pacific. This review highlights the urgent need for strategic alcohol and drug research in the Pacific as a foundation for the development of policy. [Devaney ML, Reid G, Baldwin S, Crofts N, Power R. Illicit drug use and responses in six Pacific Island countries. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2006;25:387–390]*

Key words: Cannabis, illicit drug, Pacific, situation assessment.

Introduction

This paper on the illicit drug situation in the Pacific is the first in a series of four papers from the report 'Situational analysis of illicit drug issues and responses in Asia and the Pacific', commissioned by the Australian National Council on Drugs Asia Pacific Drug Issues Committee. For the purposes of the project the Asia-Pacific Region involved the ASEAN and China Cooperative Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs (ACCORD), Timor-Leste, and six Pacific nations, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. The situational analysis focused on the unsanctioned use of all illicit drugs and directly related harms, with consideration of

pharmaceutical drugs limited to their intentional misuse.

This paper outlines the illicit drugs consumed in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu and the country responses to this use—international convention adherence, illicit drug policy, law enforcement and treatment and services.

The review found that there are limited data available to assist in understanding illicit drug use and the harms associated with its use in the Pacific. There are no formal surveillance systems in place for illicit drug use and its associated harms. Much of the research undertaken on substance use is anthropological in nature, principally concerned with traditional drugs such as kava, betel nut and other ritual plants, and undertaken mainly in

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Papua New Guinea [1–10]. There are some exceptions: for example, work has been published on the consumption of alcohol and other drugs in Oceania [11–14] and more recently there has been work undertaken on illicit drug use (mainly cannabis) in Papua New Guinea [15–24].

There has, however, been little systematic research undertaken on drugs such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu. Regional overviews undertaken by organisations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the US Drug Enforcement Agency and the Bureau for International Narcotics Law Enforcement [25–28] report on drug trafficking and seizures of heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines, and there have been four case studies examining substance use in particular settings [19,21,29,30].

Consequently, the review can only make partial comment on the illicit drug situation in the Pacific Islands with much reliance on key informant data and regional overviews.

Methods

The situational analysis was desk-based; data sources included published and unpublished literature and information from key informants.

The literature reviews included peer-reviewed articles using PubMed, Medline and PsychInfo, 'grey' literature; that is, published and unpublished reports, website searches (e.g. CIA, US State Department, UNODC, INCB) and internet lists—SEA-AIDS and the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania e-mail discussion group. In total, 76 articles/reports were reviewed for the situation analysis of illicit drug use in the Pacific.

An introductory e-mail was sent to key informants to introduce the project and invite contributions. Contact was made with the individuals who responded to the initial information requests. Contact was also made with new key informants as they were identified throughout the project and with people who were known to the researchers (either through experience or were identified in the literature review) as having relevant information.

A total of 103 key informants were contacted throughout the project. Forty-three people e-mailed information and 10 telephone interviews were conducted. Additionally, a 2-hour workshop was held in Melbourne halfway through the project. Nine Melbourne-based key informants with experience of working in the Pacific contributed to data collection, reviewed existing data for accuracy and made suggestions for further key informants and literature.

Findings

Illicit drugs consumed

Cannabis. According to key informants, the prevalence of drug use varies between the six countries reviewed, but cannabis is the by far the most common and widespread illicit drug used.

It is believed that cannabis was introduced into parts of Micronesia and Melanesia in the 1960s and 1970s [31]. The illicit use of cannabis spread to indigenous population groups, especially young people, during the 1970s and 1980s. Since then its use and production has spread quickly throughout the region.

It is reported that cannabis is the drug of choice due mainly to its availability and low cost [25]. Key informants and published reports indicated that cannabis is generally consumed with alcohol. The delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content of Papua New Guinea varieties known as 'Spak Brus' or 'New Guinea Gold' are reported to be very high, representing some of the most potent cannabis in the world [23]. Regionally, cannabis is mainly smoked but it is also chewed and sometimes baked with flour [31]. All data sources agreed that cannabis use is strongly gender-linked, with significantly more males than females using it [31]. The majority of cannabis users are young, aged between 15 and 20 years [31]. Cannabis is also used in the expatriate community and by tourists.

Heroin, methamphetamines, cocaine, and inhalants. Key informants reported that drugs such as heroin, methamphetamines and cocaine are not used commonly in six countries reviewed due to their high cost compared to the average income [25,27,31]. However, concern has been expressed by authorities that methamphetamine abuse could become an issue for the six Pacific Island countries reviewed in the near future. Injecting drug use is believed to be limited in its extent. There were a number of anecdotal reports from key informants regarding inhalant use in the countries under investigation. The most widely used inhalant is petrol.

Country responses to drugs

International convention adherence. Fiji and Tonga are party to all three international conventions, the 1961 Convention on Narcotics Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic substances and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Samoa and Vanuatu are not party to any of the Conventions. The Solomon Islands have ratified only the 1961 Convention on Narcotics Drugs. Papua New Guinea has ratified the 1961

and 1971 Conventions and adherence to the 1988 Convention is under discussion.

Regional/country illicit drug control policy and legislation. Presently, there is no overall regional or country based illicit drug policy in the Pacific (personal communication, Forum Secretariat, 2005). Moreover, the inability of current illicit drug legislation within the region to provide a common base for law enforcement agencies to operate from both a national and regional basis has been noted with some concern at the Forum Regional Security Committee Meeting (FRSC) (personal communication, Forum Secretariat, 2005). Many of the countries have obtained independence from their colonisers only in the last 30 years. Thus, the islands have inherited a variety of legal and judicial systems that makes the establishment of regional policies on drug control difficult and complex [31,32].

In 2002, a joint working group was established to address this complexity and to begin to devise a common approach across the Pacific to illicit drug control. This working group consists of the South Pacific Chiefs of Police Conference (SPCPC), the Oceania Customs Organisation and the Forum Secretariat (personal communication, Forum Secretariat, 2005). The working group has developed new legislation for Illicit Drug Control. The purpose of the Bill [34] is to repeal existing laws and put into place laws addressing aspects of illicit drugs trade that have not otherwise been addressed under current laws, or require strengthening to allow for more effective investigation and enforcement (personal communication, Forum Secretariat, 2005). The Illicit Drug Control Bill has been used for the basis of legislation in Tonga and Fiji (as well as the Northern Mariana Islands (personal communication, Forum Secretariat, 2005). Director of the National Narcotics Bureau, Papua New Guinea, reported in a press release [35] that the Bill would be brought to parliament for approval during the June 2004 session. More recent information regarding the progress of the Bill in Papua New Guinea could not be obtained.

Law enforcement response to illicit drugs

In general, the principal law enforcement agencies in the region are the Police and Customs and Excise Department and Immigration [25,27,31]. However, more recently the region has taken a whole-government approach to transnational crime issues and is working closely with the navy, defence, police and customs (personal communication 2005, Forum Secretariat).

Due to a lack of resources, training and the constraints of ineffective legislation, the police and customs administrations have difficulties fulfilling their

extended role as drug enforcement agents and generally co-operate with other countries on illicit drugs enforcement as needed [25,27,31].

Treatment responses and services

There is limited publicly available documented information on prevention and treatment interventions for drug users in the Pacific. Discussions with key informants point to the same conclusion: with the exception of the Northern Pacific, programs or interventions do not address drug users specifically. Drug use issues are generally incorporated as part of life counselling or other programs undertaken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and churches: topics include employment, family conflict, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), cannabis and alcohol use, unplanned pregnancies and domestic violence.

The psychiatric units in Port Moresby General Hospital and some other hospitals in the provinces and the National Psychiatric Hospital located at Laloki (outskirts of Port Moresby) treat some patients whose condition is linked to drug use (in the main alcohol and cannabis). Like Papua New Guinea, treatment of drug use issues in Fiji and the Solomon Islands is conducted by general or psychiatric hospitals. For example, St Giles in Fiji treats people who experience cannabis induced psychoses.

Conclusion

It is known that in addition to the direct impact of drug use to the individual, in the Pacific region there is also a plethora of socio-economic and community-level consequences [36–38], including disruption and neglect of the family, increased crime, family violence, sexual violence and exposure to HIV/AIDS and other STIs through the disinhibiting effects of drugs.

The review has highlighted the need for the formulation of regional/national drug policy and implementation of services and programs to address the needs of drug users. The review also noted the limited research on illicit drugs in the Pacific. Strategic alcohol and drug research and more formal research and data collection systems are required to enable an understanding of the illicit drug situation in the Pacific, accordingly findings from the research will inform drug policy and service development.

To address the research needs, a tangible outcome the situation analysis is the establishment of the Pacific Drug Research Network (PDRN). The aim of this group is to identify a program of applied social research that will develop an evidence base for interventions to reduce drug and alcohol use and related harms, including HIV transmission.

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