

Recommendations from Task Force on Youths and Drugs

Key Recommendations

The Task Force on Youths and Drugs (TFYD) recommendations focus on developing more targeted strategies to address youth drug abuse in the following areas:

- a. Targeted Prevention;
- b. Upstream Intervention for young abusers; and
- c. Engaging the Community.

Details of Recommendations

Targeted prevention

2 Develop toolkits for parents, educators, counsellors and National Service (NS) commanders – It is crucial to enlist the help of parents, educators, counsellors and NS commanders to support and keep youths away from drugs. These stakeholders have significant interactions with youths, and are able to influence and guide youths to stay on the right path. It is recommended that CNB enhances the toolkits for educators and counsellors, which will also be adapted for NS commanders, and develop resource toolkits for parents. The toolkits will provide information on commonly abused drugs and case studies of drug abuse by youths to raise awareness of drug issues and dispel myths on drugs such as cannabis. It will include information on how to detect signs of drug abuse, tips to help young people stay away from drugs and helplines to call if they suspect a young person is abusing drugs.

3 CNB will also work with Health Promotion Board (HPB) to include anti-drug messages in HPB's existing training programmes for educators, counsellors and youth workers on smoking and binge drinking.

4 Enhance Preventive Drug Education (PDE) in Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) and among Full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) – The Task Force assessed that the current anti-drug talks at primary and secondary schools are working well. However, there is a need to enhance PDE at the post-secondary levels at the IHLs and among NSFs, as follows:

- a. Incorporate PDE as part of the school curriculum;
- b. Incorporate testimonies from ex-abusers to share real-life stories;
- c. Engage students through topics on healthy living and responsible decision-making;
- d. Adopt peer advocacy approaches for students to be advocates against drug abuse and for student-led PDE programmes; and
- e. Remind students that it is an offence to consume drugs when overseas given that more students are going abroad on overseas exchange programmes.

5 As many young drug abusers also started smoking at a young age, CNB will work with HPB to incorporate anti-drug messages into HPB's "Live it Up!" programmes that encourage students to lead a healthy lifestyle.

6 Dispel myths regarding cannabis – The number of cannabis abusers arrested increased from 127 in 2011 to 187 in 2014. The number of *new* cannabis abusers also increased from 78 in 2011 to 139 in 2014. In 2014, CNB also detected a number of drug clusters involving young people who mostly confessed to abusing cannabis. The clusters comprised friends who introduced cannabis to each other. New clusters are formed when these youths interacted with other friends outside the original circles.

7 Interviews conducted as part of the TFYD's work showed that young cannabis abusers held the view that cannabis is a soft drug and the associated harm and addictiveness is less serious than tobacco. Such views are influenced by what they read on social media and an increasing number of US states legalising cannabis for "medical" and recreational use.

8 MHA and CNB have worked with medical professionals who endorsed the following key points about cannabis:

- a. Cannabis is highly addictive;
- b. Cannabis can be harmful; and
- c. The medical benefits of cannabis are not conclusive.

The TFYD recommends reiterating these key points on cannabis regularly at appropriate platforms to dispel misperceptions on cannabis use. The full statement on cannabis is at the Appendix.

9 Expand use of online platforms and social media – The Task Force recommends that CNB expands the use of online platforms and social media to reach out to youths and parents. CNB should build on their existing online outreach platforms, and work with agencies such as NCADA, HPB, and the respective IHLs through their online portals and social media sites to spread the anti-drug messages. The Task Force recommends that CNB shares updated information and messages more regularly with other agencies so that they can inform their target audience of emerging drug trends.

Upstream intervention

10 Introduce rehabilitation programme at National Addictions Management Service (NAMS) for youths – The existing range of rehabilitation programmes for youth drug abusers is differentiated by the risk profile of the youth abuser. There is the Youth Enhanced Supervision scheme for low-risk abusers, the Community Rehabilitation Centre for moderate-risk abusers and the Drug Rehabilitation Centre for high-risk abusers. This programme could include youths who have taken drugs but tested negative in their urine tests, perhaps because they took the drugs some time before the urine test was administered. CNB will refer these youth abusers to this programme, which will be run by the National Addictions Management Service (NAMS). More details can be found in Annex D.

Engaging the community

11 Enlist partners in a “United Against Drugs” coalition – The Task Force recommends that a “United Against Drugs” coalition be formed to raise awareness of drug abuse and keep our environment drug-free for our youths. This will comprise a pledge by government agencies, such as MOE, MHA and MINDEF, education institutions and community partners, particularly those who work with youths, to protect youths from drugs through a strong preventive education framework. The organisations will also pledge to encourage youths to develop and practise a healthy lifestyle which includes staying away from drugs.

12 Build a community of advocates against drug abuse – The Task Force recommends that MHA, CNB and NCADA continue to work with families and various communities, such as ex-abusers and their families, youth leaders, and the medical community, to grow a community of advocates against drug abuse. This will enable more voices to support our zero-tolerance approach against drugs. It is recommended that an “Anti-drug Abuse Advocacy” (A³) Network be established and advocacy training and updates on drug issues and trends will be provided to those in the network. The Task Force notes that international movie star Mr Jackie Chan was appointed as the first anti-drug abuse ambassador and recommends that more ambassadors be appointed to create greater awareness of the anti-drug cause.

Timeline

The recommendations will be implemented in the second half of 2015, through 2016.

Statement on Cannabis

Cannabis is highly addictive. Cannabis use has been known to lead to abuse of other drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine, leading to poly-drug addiction.

Cannabis can be harmful. Its abuse is associated with mental health problems as well as respiratory problems. Cannabis is especially harmful to youth, and its use has been linked to impairments in teenage brain development, lower psychomotor skills, development of psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, and cognitive decline with a drop in IQ.

The medical benefits of cannabis are not conclusive. There is no evidence from rigorous, well-controlled medical trials that cannabis is effective in managing pain as well as neurological disorders such as Alzheimer's, epilepsy and multiple sclerosis. There are other well-established alternatives to managing pain and neurological disorders. The effectiveness of these alternatives is well-researched, and they have been approved for use by the relevant authorities such as the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).