

Abstract

Introduction: Psychoactive drug use is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon causing wide range of issues imposing substantial health, social and economic burden to a country. Substance use disorders caused by psychoactive drug use are considered a neglected non communicable disease which is a salient contributor to the global burden of diseases.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to adopt and validate a tool to assess the level of psychoactive drug use, describe the epidemiological profile of drug users, and the level of psychoactive drug use among psychoactive drug users using the validated tool, assess the factors associated with psychoactive drug use and describe the barriers for accessibility to treatment among people who use drugs in the Western province.

Methodology: Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST-10) was validated among 180 and 183 drug users in the Kandy District, using exploratory and confirmatory analysis. Criterion validity was assessed by using Psychiatrist diagnosis as the gold standard. A community based cross sectional study included 870 drug users selected by RDS sampling in the Western Province. Epidemiological profile of the participants was described. Substance use disorders among participants were assessed using the validated DAST-SL tool and the level of problem severity was assessed using the cut off values generated during validation of the tool. Factors associated with substance use disorder were determined through multivariate analysis. Barriers for accessibility for treatment were assessed by both quantitatively and qualitatively. Qualitative assessment was conducted using in-depth interviews and key informant interviews among 21 psychoactive drug users and 10 service providers to gain an in-depth view from both perspectives on the barriers for accessing treatment services to quit drug use behavior.

Results: The DAST-SL was a valid and reliable tool to measure drug use severity among people who use drugs. Majority of drug users (68%) have started drug use before the age of 20 years. Cannabis was the commonest drug used (72.8%) and majority used inhalation method (96.7%) while 1.8% used Injecting method. Among the participants who ever had sex only 75.8% had heard of condoms. Among drug users 52.1% had ever sought treatment to quit drug use. Substance use disorder (SUD) was found on 88.4% of the participants. Among the participants 11.6% had

low level, 12.2% had moderate level, 47.7% had substantial level and 28.5% had severe level of drug use problems.

Among factors associated with the drug use in relation to the drug use initiation, first drug given by a friend ($p=0.04$), mother travelled abroad for work ($p=0.001$), arrested before the age of 18 years ($p=0.006$), and parental drug use ($p=0.014$) was independently significant with SUD while age of initiation of drugs and reasons for initiating drugs didn't demonstrate significant association with SUD ($p>0.05$). Current heroin use ($p=0.008$), daily drug use ($p=0.001$), poly drug use ($p=0.013$), current daily alcohol use ($p<0.001$), spend more than Rs. 40000 rupees per month on drugs ($p=0.038$), stolen goods or money to obtain drugs ($p=0.025$), and history of Tuberculosis ($p=0.003$) were also significantly associated with SUD. In relation to cessation of drug use, receiving pharmacotherapy ($p=0.001$), never seeking treatment due to not trusting treatment ($p=0.004$), never seeking treatment due to fear of experiencing pain ($p=0.006$), received treatment didn't help to deal with problems effectively ($p<0.001$), and having sought treatment two or more times ($p<0.001$) were significantly associated with SUD. Reasons for seeking treatment or the place of seeking treatment didn't demonstrate significant association with SUD ($p>0.05$) while received counseling for drug use revealed a protective effect on SUD ($p=0.002$).

Lack of understanding about treatment and past experience on treatment, lack of support and negative environmental influences affect the acceptability, availability and appropriateness of treatment and behaviour of staff affect physical accessibility, while cost of treatment and expenses during treatment act as affordability barriers to treatment.

Conclusion and Recommendations: DAST-SL is a valid and reliable method to assess drug use severity at community setting. Lack of knowledge, not seeking treatment due to lack of trust and fear of pain, alcohol use and heroin use, daily drug use, multiple drug use are modifiable factors associated with SUD. DAST-SL is a cost effective method, that can be administered by any non-medical person to identify SUD early, refer for further assessment, and early intervention. Public awareness on drug use, health problems and treatment is recommended and existing treatment services should be standardized. Key barriers which undermine access to treatment among drug users must be tackled, in order to achieve the quality, and equity goals of universal health coverage.

Keywords: Psychoactive drug use, people who use drugs, DAST, Substance use disorder, treatment access barriers