

UAE steps up efforts to combat drug trade and addiction

National study under way to determine extent of the problem

- By Samihah Zaman, Staff Reporter
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Abu Dhabi: A national study to determine the magnitude of drug use in the country and the type of drugs that are taken is currently under way, a senior drug rehabilitation official said in the capital on Monday.

The study will be completed by the end of the year, and will be used to implement more effective strategies to combat drug use and trade, Dr Hamad Al Gaferi, director general of the National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC), told *Gulf News*.

"We are assessing the problem right now, and will also work to improve anti-drug enforcement and public awareness. It is indeed a challenge, especially as we are trying to accomplish all these things simultaneously," Al Gaferi said.

He was speaking to *Gulf News* on the sidelines of the first forum held by the International Drug Policy Consortium in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Policy

At the forum, international health experts met with policy makers to discuss ways to effectively combat and reduce drug use and addiction.

One of the key topics of discussion at the forum was whether drug users should be allowed to seek treatment on their own or whether they should be given mandatory treatment, with or without their consent.

Dr Nasser Loza, secretary-general for mental health at the Ministry of Health in Egypt, described a change in the country's legislation wherein drug addicts are now only given mandatory treatment without their consent if they have committed a crime.

"Prior to 2008, drug addicts could be involuntary treated at a rehabilitation centre without their consent, and they could be kept at the facility for as long as the clinician thought further treatment was needed," Loza said.

"However, it is harder to treat an addict who feels the clinician is the reason he is kept at the centre, and this is now only done in cases where addicts commit a crime," he added.

Rehabilitation

In the UAE, while drug crimes get a minimum sentence of four years, judges can sentence drug users caught for the first time either to up to four years in prison or make it mandatory for them to undergo a six-month rehabilitation programme.

In addition, family members can also request the rehabilitation centre to take in an addict without his or her consent.

"When the NRC was first established, none of our patients came in voluntarily. They were required mostly by the law, and sometimes by their families, to seek treatment. Nowadays however, more than 50 per cent of our patients seek treatment on their own volition, which is a positive sign," Al Gaferi said.

Reduction: Supply and demand

The UAE is working with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to reduce supply and demand, said Dr Hatem Aly, UNODC representative and head of the sub-regional office for the GCC. "To reduce demand, effective rehabilitation and public awareness are key. Reducing supply however needs regional and international cooperation..." Dr Aly told *Gulf News*.

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