



## Reflection of New Drug Policy: Changing Drug Consumption Patterns and its Challenges

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### Dear Editor-in-Chief

According to the biopsychosocial theory of substance use disorders (SUD), several factors from the molecular and cellular level to the socio-economic level affect SUD. Social factors also include the policies of the country's government as well as the governments of a region (1). One of the most important international events in 2021 was the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, which ushered in a new era in the country. Afghanistan is considered one of the largest drug producers in the world; the production and trafficking of narcotics in the country has increased almost fifty-fold in the last two decades. The Taliban leader has issued a decree banning the consumption and distribution, purchase and sale, import and export, and factories producing narcotics cultivation in Afghanistan in 2022. Opium cultivation across the country has declined significantly, from 233,000 hectares to just 10,800 hectares in 2023. This significant decline has also resulted in a 95% drop in opium availability, from 6,200 tons in 2022 to 333 tons in 2023 (2, 3). The price of a kilogram of dried opium has therefore increased from less than USD 100/kg to more than USD 450/kg in Oct 2022, reaching USD 580/kg in 2023 (2).

The implementation of the above-mentioned policies and the resulting unemployment of a large part of society may increase the number of emigrants from Afghanistan, especially to neighboring countries, including Iran, and cause social problems such as marginalization and addiction (1). The discovery and seizure of synthetic drugs and various types of methamphetamines (meth) throughout the region indicate that the pattern of drug production in Afghanistan and Iran has changed from traditional substances to industrial drugs. In recent years, however, the Iranian meth market appears to be on the rise again. The seizure of 17 tons of the drug in 2020 was three times the amount seized in 2022. Since then, meth seizures on the border with Afghanistan have reached a new record. In 2023, the seizure of 1118 kg of crystal meth in Iran, along with about 24 tons of mineral ore, was the largest seizure of meth in Iran to date. The Iranian Anti-Drug Police report shows a 20% increase in meth seizures in 2023 compared to 2022 (4).

All regional countries and the international community must take action to prevent the potential consequences. With the increase in the price of opium, SUD patients are turning to either methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) or meth



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use. Therefore, SUD treatment centers in Iran will face many referrals. Pharmacies will face an increase in patients taking tramadol, fentanyl, and sufentanil and their side effects (5). The lack of widespread information about SUD treatment centers (6) and the abandonment of untreated SUD patients in the community leads them to fall into the trap of drug dealers. Impurities in opium, such as lead, are expected to increase, poisonings and deaths from overdose and injection of drugs with high levels of impurities are expected to increase, and the number of meth users is expected to rise. Meth has serious physical and psychological effects on the user. Meth-induced psychosis is one of the most dangerous diseases which found in about 47% of meth users (7).

Therefore, planning and evaluating health policies seems necessary to address this situation. The planning should be such that SUD patients are directed to abstinence treatment or MMT therapy. A SUD patient who has accessed an MMT center should never be left without treatment due to the limited capacity of a MMT center. Treatment should begin with immediate admission and then the attempt will be made to transition the patient to the other MMT center.

Harm reduction services, available syringe and methadone dispensing, overdose management training, naloxone provision, therapist retraining, and education of drug users and their families should be expanded. Consideration should also be given to training obstetrics and gynecology departments on how to recognize and treat withdrawal syndrome in newborns of addicted mothers.

Public education and primary prevention programs are necessary but not sufficient. The signs of meth use should also be known to everyone. In this context, the mass media can play an effective role. Ways to prevent SUD should be taught in schools and universities.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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