Abstract

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) are becoming a major challenge to public health and drug policies in Europe and have become a high priority in Europe. Recent reports from the EMCDDA, Early Warning Systems and National focal points note sharp rises in availability and consumption of an ever-increasing number of and variation in notably, as well as synthetic opioids, stimulants and non-medical use of prescription drugs. This illustrates the current changing and intervening drug markets of irregular/recreational and problematic drug use, including misusing risky drug taking patterns, injecting, polydrug use and related (and non-related) health issues. The reports emphasize health concerns and stress the need to identify effective health policies in the fields of prevention, demand reduction and harm reduction polices as well as adequate health services. This project contributes to the development of innovative and effective health promotion interventions regarding emerging NPS use in Europe by bringing together quality research capacity (Charles University in Prague) and a selected group of experienced service providers in the field of health promotion and harm reduction (APDES, FRRK, Prokis, Sanarini, Carusel and Minar).

Introduction

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) are a fundamental public health issue in Europe in recent years. The 2014 report from the EMCDDA, Early Warning Systems and surveys (EMCDDA, 2014; REITOX, 2014; GDS, 2014) are reporting a rising trend in the availability and consumption of newly emerging NPS and their increase in variation in NPS. The EU Early warning system (EWS) for monitoring new psychoactive substances ensures that Europe continues to be at the forefront of this rapidly changing field. In 2012, 73 new substances were officially identified and further characterized as synthetic cannabinoids, synthetic opioids, stimulants (e.g. methamphetamine, MDMA) and new group of designer drugs. Significant developments have seen the issue evolve into a complex challenge for scientists, law enforcement and policy makers. The internet appears to be playing an ever-increasing role in shaping the European drug market, regarding availability, trade and consumer information/expertise/marketings. Thus, emerging patterns of NPS use in the EU28 are largely unknown, as are the associated risks.

Reports from harm reduction services across the EU – involved in this project – suggest that use of NPS is no longer limited to “drug experimenters” or recreational drug users, but moving into populations of people that use drugs in a more problematic way as well. NPS are increasingly injected by some specific subpopulations (see e.g. Botescu, 2011). In addition, a shift away from traditional substances like heroin, cocaine and amphetamine-type synthetic opiates and depressants (e.g. fentanyl, GBPs), stimulants (e.g. methamphetamine, MDMA) can be observed. Another dimension of the recent developments and shifts in drug availability and consumption are the misuse of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications. Public health, treatment and harm reduction services across Europe are unprepared for the rapidly expanding use of NPS and lack capacity and tools for addressing the rising use of these substances among marginalized, often young, drug consumers, nor for addressing the risks and potential harms associated with these substances. The EMCDDA reports emphasize public health concerns regarding increased levels of injection, mental health problems and physical damage (EMCDDA, 2014) and stress the need to identify and introduce appropriate harm reduction responses.

Scopes and objectives

This project contributes to the overall EU objective of developing innovative and effective responses to emerging NPS use in Europe. In collaboration with experienced civil society organizations, the project will contribute to the readiness of relevant stakeholders throughout Europe to address NPS in populations of PUDs, combining research, practical guidance development and capacity building activities. It will involve research experts, experienced health services and an extensive grass roots network in Europe. The project will develop appropriate knowledge, capacity and skills and diffuse these to stakeholders across the EU. More specifically, the project will perform a review of the use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) in populations of people that use drugs heavily or in a problematic way in the EU28 countries and identify the associated risks for harm and the existing legislative, preventive and harm reduction responses; assess, identify and describe harmful patterns of NPS use among this population, NPS related risks and harms in 5 selected countries, as well as to identify and prepare adequate tailored public health responses; develop and implement targeted pilot interventions for preventing and harm reduction targeting NPS use among people who use drugs heavily or in a problematic way; build best practice guidance and capacity among harm reduction workers towards improving harm reduction responses; disseminate the results of the Europe-wide inventory. 5 country assessment and local pilots on public health responses, through an online resource centre and a training manual, and at regional and national conferences.

Methods and Materials

The project consists of three main elements: research, practice and capacity building. The research element is being addressed in WS 1 and WS 2; the overall inventory in EU28 countries and the in-depth rapid assessment in 5 selected European countries.

WS1 will (i) assess the actual situation regarding overall NPS use, the associated harms and their availability in the EU28 countries, focusing on PUDs populations; (ii) assess the risks for harm associated with heavy or problematic drug use; and, (iii) identify legislative, preventive and harm reduction responses to NPS use and problems;

Dia/ACUNI is developing a tailored questionnaires and instruments for assessing the extent and the nature of NPS use in populations of people that use drugs heavily at national level. Trained by and under supervision of Dia/ACUNI, key informants (selected members of the Correlation Network) in each EU28 country will be contracted to interview experts.

WS2 has developed and is implementing a Rapid Assessment and Response (RAR) intervention about the extent and nature of NPS use among people that use drugs heavily in 5 selected countries. RAR is an intervention-driven research method that teams up researchers and stakeholders in community based research, intervention development and preparing the implementation of research in conjunction. The assessment and response will start with an expert interview and research the practical part of the project.

The assessment will be conducted in five pre-selected countries with clear indications of increased availability and consumption of NPS (e.g. smoked, homemade methamphetamine in Greece, methedrone and analogues in Romania and homemade methamphetamine in Poland). Local collaborators will collect published and unpublished information on NPS use in PUD populations. Results of WS1 and WS2 will be analysed in conjunction and fed into WS3 – the intervention development and the capacity building part – informing and providing research-based guidance and support to the development of tailored policies and harm reduction interventions on local, national and European level.

WS 3 will focus on the implementation of harm reduction interventions (pilots) targeting NPS users among PUDs and improve skills and capacities among service providers (including professionals and peer workers). The activities in WS 3 will build on the results of WS2 (inventory in WS2 and WS2 results – in 5 selected countries). FRG will support the implementing partners during the implementation by developing a step-by-step guidance document for the implementation, by evaluating the interventions (through feedback forms, interviews and focus groups) and providing ongoing support and supervision. FRG will also develop a training manual which will provide specific support during the implementation of the national trainings. The European training course will ensure capacity building on a broader European level.

WS 4 will ensure a broad and effective dissemination of project activities and results. By using the dissemination channels from all partners and in particular the broad network of Correlation, the project will raise awareness and contribute to an increased knowledge base in regard to NPS use among PUDs in Europe.

The combination of research, practice and capacity building contributes to an effective collaboration, and a holistic approach, taking into account all relevant critical factors. The use of RAR is a cost-effective method. RAR combines research and practical elements, by directly suggesting tailored interventions.

Expected results

The project aims at developing innovative methodologies to identify and monitor new trends and patterns in the consumption and consequences of NPS, and the development of targeted approaches in prevention, harm reduction and treatment.

Current efforts addressing NPS in Europe describe, quantify and respond to the overall phenomena of NPS use and markets in the Union and its member states; however, they do not or barely address the emerging use in people with a problematic or heavy use of drugs, which are most marginalized and where the associated harms will likely be most profound. In order to timely respond to this hazardous trend, we identified an urgent need for solid scientific information, practical expertise and capacity development for addressing NPS use among people that use drugs heavily and at risk populations. At present, an informed and integrated approach to this gap between emerging patterns of NPS in these populations on the one hand, and service and policy development on the other could greately support EU member states in their efforts to respond with appropriate measures.

The added value of the project lies therefore in bridging this gap by proactively developing the knowledge, capacity and skills required for effective public health and harm reduction responses targeting NPS use across the EU.

Building on and connected with the existing efforts mentioned above, the project will develop an innovative, integrative, issue driven collaboration between academic experts, local drug services, national and European monitoring and resource centres, and the PUD communities at risk across the work streams.

Policy Recommendations based on the EU28 overview and the RAR implementation will be produced targeting policy makers, researchers and service providers, 5 harm reduction tailored interventions will be implemented in the 5 partner countries as well as 5 local training courses and one European training course. All of this will result in a European Manual on NPS and effective harm reduction responses to NPS use in Europe.

The project combines research capacity with the expertise of a European network of drug and health services. It will enable grassroots organizations to assess NPS use and to develop and implement tailored and targeted responses.

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References