

## EDITORIAL

# Curbing the Menace of Substance Abuse among Youths in Nigeria: A Call to Action

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Substance abuse which refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs <sup>1</sup> has reached epidemic proportions affecting between 20 and 40 percent of youths in Nigeria.<sup>2,3</sup> It is a public health concern that threatens the health, well-being, and future of our young generation. The alarming rise in substance abuse among youths has far-reaching and devastating consequences, including academic underachievement, mental health problems, social problems such as family life disruptions, loss in productivity, legal problems and even death.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Moreover, it can perpetuate cycles of poverty, crime, and social inequality. <sup>6</sup>

Commonly abused substances in Nigeria include cannabis, opioids (non-medical use of prescription opioids), cough syrup, Tramadol, among others. <sup>2,6</sup> These are obtained mostly from pharmacies/patent medicine shops, open drug markets, drug hawkers, fellow drug abusers, friends, etc. <sup>2</sup> The high rates of substance abuse among the youths suggests easy accessibility of the substances, peer group influence and possibly lack of effective counseling programs in educational institutions. <sup>2</sup>

The root causes of this crisis are complex and multifaceted. Social media pressure, stress, and anxiety can drive young people to seek escape through substance use. Poor socioeconomic factors such as poverty and unemployment; lack of access to mental health services and effective education also contribute to the problem. <sup>2</sup> More worrisome is the fact that in spite of being knowledgeable about its harmful effects, a high proportion of youths still indulge in substance abuse as reported by Obi et al.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, despite the existence of federal drug laws, policies like the National Drug Control Master Plan (NDCMP)], enforcement agencies such as the National Drug Laws Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), National Agency

for Foods and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and other strategies for prevention, the burden continues to rise in Nigeria. <sup>2</sup>

To combat this crisis, a comprehensive and multifaceted approach is necessary, involving parents, educational institutions, healthcare professionals, policymakers, government and the community at large. Proper education and awareness are key, therefore, educational institution must incorporate substance abuse prevention programs into their curricula, highlighting the risks and promoting healthy alternatives. Parents and caregivers must also engage in open conversations with their children, setting clear expectations and providing support.

Increased access to mental health services and counseling for early intervention and treatment are crucial. Since many young people turn to substances as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, or trauma, addressing underlying issues is essential. Mental health services (counseling, therapy, and rehabilitation services) must be readily available, accessible, affordable and stigma-free, and alternative coping mechanisms, such as sports, arts, and mindfulness programs, must be promoted. In addition, healthcare professionals must be trained to identify and address substance abuse issues, and educational institutions must have protocols in place for referrals and support.

Community-based initiatives are vital. Support groups, peer mentoring programs, and community events can provide a safe and supportive environment for young people to share their experiences and receive guidance. Lastly, policy reforms and enforcement are necessary. Stricter regulations on substance sales and distribution, increased funding for prevention and treatment programs, and harsher penalties for drug-related offenses can serve as deterrents.

In conclusion, curbing substance abuse among youths requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders. By educating, intervening,

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addressing underlying issues, supporting community initiatives, and enforcing policies, the youths can be empowered to make healthy choices and build a brighter future.

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