

Drug abuse and drug situation in Hong Kong in first half of 2024

The Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) noted at its meeting today (September 20) the statistical figures of the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) and other drug-related figures in the first half of 2024. ACAN noticed that the total number of reported drug abusers in the first half of 2024 was lower than that of 2023, while the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 increased. ACAN will closely monitor the situation in the remaining quarters of 2024, and will carry out its anti-drug work according to the latest situation.

Figures from the CRDA revealed that the total number of reported drug abusers in the first half of 2024 decreased by 8 per cent (from 3 279 to 3 025) when compared with that of 2023. The three most common types of drugs abused in the first half of 2024 were heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine (commonly known as "Ice"). Nevertheless, the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 increased from 394 to 452 when compared with the same period last year. Among these reported young drug abusers, nearly 75 of them abused "space oil". In this group, the most common type of drugs abused was cannabis, followed by cocaine. "Space oil" has become the third most common type of drugs abused for the first time.

The ACAN Chairman, Dr Donald Li, said "space oil" is a name drug dealers created in order to sugar-coat drugs with devious tactics. "Space oil" is a kind of liquid with harmful substances added illegally. Although there is no standard formula for "space oil", it usually contains an anaesthetic called etomidate, which can only be prescribed by a doctor. Etomidate is regulated as Part 1 poison according to the law.

Dr Li explained that, in addition to etomidate, "space oil" may be mixed with other drugs, including cannabis, "Ice" and ketamine (commonly known as "K"), etc. "Space oil" can cause serious physical and mental harm, including addiction, memory loss, seizure, unconsciousness, and even death. He added that etomidate and other drugs are strictly regulated under the existing laws. Members of the public must not defy these laws.

"It is scientifically proven that using e-cigarettes is harmful to one's health. Vaping 'space oil' through e-cigarettes is the same as taking drugs. I urge young people to be more vigilant against 'space oil', and they should never try this emerging drug out of curiosity. Otherwise, they will lose their health, their prospects, and even their precious lives. I also suggest that the Government should adopt measures for raising public awareness of 'space oil'."

The Narcotics Division (ND) of the Security Bureau is highly concerned about the emerging trend of "space oil" abuse. It has adopted the suggestions from ACAN and launched education and publicity initiatives targeting "space

oil" to enhance the public's abilities to protect themselves against this emerging drug. In July this year, the Commissioner for Narcotics wrote to all primary schools and secondary schools in Hong Kong, reminding the education sector to stay alert to "space oil". At the end of last month, the ND co-organised an exchange session with the Hospital Authority and a social welfare service organisation to improve the capabilities of front-line social workers for providing services to "space oil" abusers. The ND is also stepping up promotion and released an animated video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHQVLgU3wAA) on the theme of "space oil" at the end of August to remind the public about the harmful effects caused by "space oil". Together with relevant government departments and social welfare service organisations, the ND will meet the education sector on October 8 to further raise teaching staff's awareness of "space oil". Furthermore, law enforcement agencies (LEAs) will step up patrols, including online surveillance, carry out intelligence-based law enforcement actions and continue to spare no effort to combat crimes relating to "space oil".

According to the statistical figures from the LEAs, the number of persons arrested for drug offences in the first half of 2024 dropped by 10 per cent (from 1 791 to 1 611) when compared with that of 2023. The number of young arrestees aged under 21 decreased by 32 per cent (from 179 to 122). Cannabis and cocaine were the main drugs involved in these arrests. According to the court cases concluded for the same period, the conviction rate of persons being prosecuted for drug offences was as high as nearly 90 per cent. As for young offenders aged under 21 who were sentenced to imprisonment for drug trafficking, more than half of them were sentenced to over five years in prison, and the longest period of imprisonment was nearly 22 years. The ND reminded members of the public, especially young people, not to take part in drug trafficking activities out of greed. Otherwise, there will be lifelong regrets. Young age is not a valid mitigating factor. Anyone who commits a drug offence is liable for serious criminal punishment. The maximum penalty for drug trafficking is life imprisonment and a fine of \$5 million.

The statistical figures of the CRDA for the first half of 2024 are available on the website of the ND (www.nd.gov.hk/en/crda_main_charts_and_tables.html). The ND's website (www.nd.gov.hk) as well as its official accounts ("narcotics.divisionhk") on Facebook and Instagram also contain detailed information about drugs, including frequently asked questions about "space oil", cocaine and cannabis for the public's reference. If members of the public encounter any drug problems, they can send messages to 98 186 186 on instant messaging applications WhatsApp and WeChat, or call the 24-hour hotline 186 186 to seek information or assistance from professional social workers.