

INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the INHSU Africa Followup Event that was held with South African Partners on 31 August 2020 to mark International Overdose Awareness Day. This event was a partnership between INHSU, TB HIV Care and the South African Network of People who Use Drugs (SANPUD).

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This Roundtable followed a regional meeting held in Cape Town South Africa in February 2020 (INHSU Africa 2020). The Regional meeting was held to provide a platform for people who use drugs, policymakers, political decision-makers, advocates and clinicians working in the African region to come together to reflect on current work to respond to the issues of HIV and Hepatitis C and the impacts on people who use drugs. At the meeting, there was a commitment for ongoing work. INHSU was supported by the Open Societies Foundation to facilitate work in two focal countries – South Africa and Kenya. While work commenced soon after the regional meeting, the emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic shortly after necessitated the pausing of this work until lockdowns were eased in both countries. In late May the project restarted and efforts were made to re-engage delegates regarding current priorities and how to support ongoing projects.

EVENT OBJECTIVES

This event provided the opportunity for project partners to connect with collaborating partners including research institutions, advocacy organisations and government policy makers to explore the specific issues related to overdoses in South Africa, particularly in the context of COVID-19. This was the first opportunity that had been held in South Africa to hold discussions on this issue across these different sectors. Key objectives included:

- Providing a platform for people who use drugs to share their experiences of overdose in the context of COVID-19
- Providing an opportunity to highlight good practice, and examples of projects that are innovative in responding to opioid overdose risk in the context of COVID-19
- To connect with government decision makers in relation to the policy context for overdose response and understand the data that is being collected at a national level
- To showcase new resources responding to the issue of overdose in the current context.

ROUNDTABLE PREPARATION, FORMAT AND PARTICIPATION

A one hour virtual session was organised on the Zoom meeting platform. All South African delegates from INHSU Africa 2020, as well as other invited attendees who were not able to attend the February meeting were invited to attend.

107 people registered for the event, with 66 attendees participated in the event. The event was hosted by partners INHSU, TB HIV Care and SANPUD. Charity Monareng from TB HIV Care chaired the event.

Summary of presentations and key messages

Overdose in the time of COVID-19: issues, risks and realities: MJ Stowe, SANPUD

- While there is little data on the rates of opioid-related overdose, the experience of people who use drugs suggest this is a significant issue
- Impacts of COVID-19 have include periods of non-use which have impacted on opioid tolerance, and also changes to supply, with an associated increased risk for overdose

International Overdose Awareness Day Event South Africa

- SANPUD suggested that key responses to keep people safer would include increased access to flexible medically assisted treatment (opioid substitution therapy) and better community access to naloxone

Community based overdose services: Michael Wilson, Advance, Access and Deliver

- Engagement with communities has shown that overdoses (lethal and non-lethal) are occurring and individuals are willing to report their experience. Their research also showed that there is sharing of overdose experience amongst at risk groups in eThekweni
- There is a need to raise awareness of overdose and on who to call for help
- Better surveillance is needed to monitor and track occurrence and locations of drug overdose
- An exciting development of the project was the eThekweni Municipality setting aside a City owned building, Bellhaven Memorial Hall, to Safer Cities to run a harm reduction centre. This has included an OST Programme, a Needle Syringe Programme, Psychosocial Interventions, Testing and referral for treatment for TB, HIV, and Hepatitis. Plans for a Primary Care Clinic in coordination with DOH are underway, as well as discussions around an Overdose Prevention Space.

Saving lives and minimising the harms of drugs: David Bayever, Central Drug Authority

- There was discussion about key policy frameworks including that the National Drug Master Plan (NDMP) 2019-2024 has recognised key barriers to reduce overdose for people who use drugs. The Plan also includes measures to ensure a person-centered approach to reducing overdoses.
- Goal 3 of the NDMP includes increasing the availability of and access to controlled substances exclusively for medical and scientific purposes, while preventing their diversion. This includes implementing Opioid Agonist/Substitution Treatment (OA/ST), such as methadone and buprenorphine and emergency management of opioid, including heroin, overdose programmes.

Policy support for overdose and access to naloxone: Kgalabi Ngako, National Department of Health

- DOH highlighted how the National Health Sector Drug Master Plan (2019 – 2025) was aligned to the 2016 UNGASS outcomes document, and included interventions around overdose management.
- Naloxone is registered in South African and on the Essential Medicines List for use at all levels of the health system (including primary care).
- DOH highlight that the draft OST implementation plan includes increased access to naloxone.

University of Pretoria's COVID-19 overdose prevention video: Dr Urvi Bhoora, University of Pretoria

- Provided information regarding a community-based program operating in Pretoria (COSUP). Key activities include screening and brief interventions, medical examinations and treatment, counselling services, OST, NSP, HIV testing, TB screening and social services
- Outcomes were presented including 17 community-based sites operating in Tshwane. There is a retention rate of 60% and a 91% return rate for used needles and syringes.
- Presented a short awareness raising [video](#) focused towards community members that aims to provide information about ways to reduce risk of overdose in the COVID-19 context

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The event raised a number of significant issues. They included:

- There is a need to improve data on the issues of overdose, and the impact of COVID-19
- There are mechanisms to work with decision makers, and champions who are working to improve access to harm reduction services to reduce the impact of overdose
- The potential role of people who use drugs to work within the community to reduce overdoses is significant and should be harnessed
- Ongoing dialogue across the different sectors is key to addressing this issue