University of Pretoria and City of Tshwane lead substance use intervention

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The City of Tshwane is working with the University of Pretoria to implement a ground-breaking new approach to address the harmful use of substances and their impact in communities. Using a community oriented primary care approach, the community oriented substance use programme (COSUP) could become a model of effective best practice in the world, according to experts. This approach is making South Africa a global leader in a community based response to the care and treatment of people who use drugs.

The programme began in August 2016 and is already showing its worth. Eight sites (with an additional six satellite sites in Mamelodi and Soshanguve) are operational across the City of Tshwane. Over 2500 people are enrolled, with 450 on medication to assist them reduce and stop their Nyaope use. Also, a number of people are now employed or receiving training to help them earn a livelihood.

Recognising that the current responses to drug use were not working and desperate to find a way to reduce the impact of drugs on people and communities the City of Tshwane turned to the University of Pretoria, Department of Family Medicine. Professor Jannie Hugo immediately saw the need and opportunity to make a real difference. “For years we have tried the war on drugs thing, and it has done nothing to reduce the levels of drug use, and some would say it has actually increased some of the harms. So, we said, let’s look at the evidence, consult experts, and let’s do something that will make a difference, even if it may seem controversial.”

The approach grew out of the community oriented primary care programme (COPC) that the University oversees. “Instead of waiting for people to get sick and come to the clinic or hospital,” explains the University’s Professor Tessa Marcus, “we try and ensure that by being in the community, by visiting every household, we can improve health and prevent or reduce the severity of disease.”

In a similar way, the community oriented substance use program seeks to engage with people who use drugs in the community, ideally before their use of drugs has become a serious problem. COSUP offers a range of interventions that are non-confrontational, collaborative and based on the best available scientific knowledge appropriate for the local context.

Nelson Medeiros of OUT Wellbeing’s Step Up Project offers services such as HIV counselling, wound care and health services to people who inject drugs in the City. The project Medeiros heads up embraces the principles of harm reduction and community involvement and consultation. “All my staff are people who used drugs.” he said, “No one would give them a job, or even the time of day. Look at them now, out there saving lives, preventing the spread of HIV and TB, and making a contribution to the City.” Much of this approach helped inform the development of COSUP, and the project also employs 20 people who have shown potential while accessing services.

One such person is Jacob Chanda, who says: “Life just keeps getting better since I met the COSUP programme. Now I am even back at night school and help others who need this help. I have attended a life skills course at POPUP and I am ready for the next phase of my life, thanks to COSUP!”

Dr Lorinda Kroukamp, who is the project leader, believes that the project will not only show that people who use drugs can become participating members of society and will reduce the harms and impact related to the use of drugs, but will also cost less than traditional approaches. “Coming from a background in the pharmaceutical business and being involved with the roll-out of programmes focusing on increasing access to affordable healthcare, including medicines, in Africa, I am well aware of the need to ensure that projects are sustainable, practical and appropriate to the setting. Most importantly they must be cost effective. For years we have been spending millions on building rehabs, but they can only help a few people at a time, and the evidence shows they are not very successful.” Dr Kroukamp explained that COSUP is built on existing services and structures and is in the community, therefore it is cheaper, more responsive, and people can access it when and where they need help.

MMC Health, Councillor Sakkie du Plooy, for the Department responsible for addressing the response of the Tshwane Metro to the DSA situation in our City: “When I learnt about and see the magnitude of young people enslaved to one or other drug and how it messed up their lives I doubt if the Metro is ever going to make any difference to this situation. That was a year ago. I was hopeless! And as time goes by and the COSUP programme proceeded I started to have hope. I am confident, and it will take time, but I am confident that this is not a hopeless situation. With COSUP we see real progress. I have a vision of more and more young people who will be rehabilitated and become Peer Outreach Workers who in turn go back to their former brothers and sisters in ‘captivity’ and journey with them out of it. And then the tide will turn. To those young people in ‘captivity’ I would like to say: ‘there is HOPE’.”

Shaun Shelly, an expert on drug use and policy, is a consultant on the project and he believes that this project puts the City of Tshwane ahead of other cities. “This project is unique because most cities are not prepared to back the science and approaches that work. They are so used to the ‘war on drugs’ talk that when you start talking harm reduction, inclusion, access to services and approaching this from a rights and developmental perspective they are simply afraid to take the brave steps that the City of Tshwane has taken. I have presented this concept around the world at various conferences, and the experts agree that the COSUP approach, if supported, will be the way of the future. And it was done here, in Tshwane, first.”

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