

The Current Status of and Measures against Drug Abuse in Japan

JMAJ 54(3): 168–171, 2011

Kunihiko KITAGAKI*¹

Key words Drug abuse, The Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy, Education, Young people, Normative consciousness

Introduction: The government's efforts toward eradication of drug abuse

In comparison to other industrialized countries, it is said that drug-related offenses occur less in Japan. However, comprehensive measures must be taken by the entire government in order to eradicate drug abuse in Japan. In response, in April 1997, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse*² (herein-after referred to as the Headquarters) was established in Cabinet Office, with Prime Minister as the chair.

In May 1998, the Headquarters formulated the Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy¹ for 2 purposes. One was to implement emergency measures against the drug prevalence (called the “third prevalence period of drug abuse” in Japan) in order to end it as soon as possible, and the other was to make a positive contribution to solving the global problem of drug abuse. Four objectives were set clarifying the status and the problems in each area, and the measures required to be implemented by the relevant ministries and agencies were determined. When the 5-year term was coming to an end, the Headquarters realized that the third prevalence period

of drug abuse was still continuing. So, the New Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy was formulated,² which proposed to continue comprehensive measures through closer collaboration among the ministries and agencies.

In reviewing the achievements of the Five-Year Drug Abuse Strategy of 1998 and 2003, the Headquarters considered that the efforts over the decade produced certain results. However in recent statistics, although the number of persons arrested for stimulant-related offenses shows a decreasing trend, those arrests account for about 80% of all drug-related arrests. Thus, stimulant-related cases continue to be the main drug-related offenses in Japan. Furthermore, the number of persons arrested for marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*)-related offense had roughly doubled over the decade. In terms of offenses related to 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) and other synthetic drugs, there was a steep increase in the confiscated amount. In addition, more than 80% of arrests related to both marijuana and MDMA were first-time offenders. These facts indicate that the scope of these drug abuse had expanded. In light of these situations, the Third Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy was formulated in August 2008.³

*1 Senior Specialist for Health Education, School Health Education Division, Sports and Youth Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Tokyo, Japan (kitagaki@mext.go.jp).

*2 The Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse was abolished on December 26, 2008. Instead, Meeting for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse was established under Ministerial Meeting Concerning Measures against Crime, convened by Prime Minister. All the matters that had been decided by the Headquarters are now handled by Meeting for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse.

This article is a revised English version of a paper originally published in the Journal of the Japan Medical Association (Vol.139, No.3, 2010, pages 690–692). This article is based on a lecture presented at Fiscal Year 2009 Maternal and Child Health Seminar “Toward the Realization of the Japan Medical Association Child Support Declaration IV” held at the JMA Hall on February 21, 2010.

Table 1 Proportion of students who replied that drugs “Should never be used”

	Male (%)			Female (%)		
	1997	2000	2006	1997	2000	2006
Age 11–12 (6th grade in elementary school)	89.5	89.2	91.9	92.4	91.9	95.3
Age 14–15 (3rd year of junior high school)	77.9	82.5	87.6	85.0	85.9	91.2
Age 17–18 (3rd year of high school)	68.6	74.5	81.7	81.4	87.2	91.1

(Extracted and modified from Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan.¹)**Table 2 Number and proportion of arrests for narcotics-related crimes by age group**

		Under 20	Age 20–29	Age 30 +	Total
Stimulant	No. of arrests (persons)	249	2,509	8,267	11,025
	(%)	2.3	22.8	75.0	100.0
Marijuana	No. of arrests (persons)	227	1,503	1,028	2,758
	(%)	8.2	54.5	37.3	100.0
MDMA or other synthetic drugs	No. of arrests (persons)	25	151	105	281
	(%)	8.9	53.7	37.4	100.0

(Extracted and modified from National Police Agency, Japan.²)

Current Status of Drug Abuse by Young People and the Government’s Efforts

The reports of the Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse

The Third Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy acknowledges certain results from that of 2003, which implemented various measures from 2003 to 2007, such as betterment of guidance in teaching the harmful effects and hazards of drug abuse to schoolchildren, the reinforcement of awareness-raising campaigns and patrols by juvenile officers in the streets and other measures to develop an environment that restrains young people from drug abuse. As results, the Third Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy states that the number of students who are absolutely against using illicit drugs has increased, and the number of young people arrested in stimulant-related offenses has decreased.

Namely, while 609 junior high school students

and 759 high school students had been arrested or taken into custody due to inhalation of paint-thinner or other organic volatile solvents in 1998, the statistics in 2008 showed a marked decrease, with 59 and 64, respectively. Moreover, National Survey on Consciousness of Students on Drugs, conducted in 2006 by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan, showed a similar trend. The proportion of both male and female students responding to the question “What is your opinion about the use of stimulants and other drugs?” with the reply “Any drugs should never be used” increased successively across all grades from 1997 to 2000, and was highest in 2006 (**Table 1**).⁴ Meanwhile, the proportion of students responding with “It is one’s own decision” decreased compared to the past 2 surveys in all grades in all categories of schools, indicating an improvement in the students’ consciousness toward drug abuse.

Despite these positive trends, the number of marijuana-related arrests has more than doubled

from 1,316 arrests in 1998 to 2,758 arrests in 2008, and the number of offenses related to MDMA or other synthetic drugs has also gradually increased in the past few years, compared to the period before 1998. In terms of young people charged with offenses related to marijuana or synthetic drugs including MDMA, 10% of the total arrests are minors (under the age of 20), whereas young adults in their 20s account for more than 50% (Table 2).⁵

Under such circumstances, the Headquarters recognized that the drug abuse with regard to marijuana and synthetic drugs including MDMA is prevalent among young people, and acknowledged the need for a continuous collaboration between the relevant organizations as well as further improvement of measures against drug abuse by young people.

Efforts of Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan—the necessity of drug abuse prevention education

“To eradicate drug abuse by young people and boost normative consciousness to deny drug abuse” is one of the 4 objectives of the Third Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy. It also stipulates that in order to “improve and strengthen guidance on drug abuse prevention in schools,” betterment of guidance to students in elementary, junior high, and high schools must be ensured, and continued efforts will be necessary to boost normative consciousness toward the eradication of drug abuse among students.

The school-based drug abuse prevention education aims to eliminate the factors that tempt students to use addictive drugs, teach them to avoid the temptation factors, and encourage them to refuse the use of addictive drugs by themselves. In order to achieve these goals, guidance on the harmful effects and hazards of drug abuse are included on physical and health education classes in elementary, junior high, and high schools. Moral education classes, special activities, and the “period of integrated study” are also to be utilized to provide guidance throughout all school education activities.

Drug abuse prevention education at schools, like any other health education program, needs to deliver information according to the developmental stages of the students. For basic education, physical and health education classes play

the main role. For the further improvement of the guidance on the basic education, the Headquarters is urging schools to seek cooperation from the experts on drug abuse. Meanwhile, for advanced education to train capacity and skills that put knowledge to practical use, methods such as brain-storming, role-playing, and advertising analysis may be utilized. However, these methods will require considerable time and proper guidance. To support the drug abuse prevention education at schools, MEXT organizes seminars for the instructors and also makes and distributes teaching materials for school teachers.

In the past, people were sometimes hesitant about implementing drug abuse prevention education at school, fearing the possibility of provoking drug abuse among children. In Fiscal Year 2004, however, guidance on the prevention of drug abuse was provided in over 80% of elementary schools and over 90% of junior high schools and high schools. While current elementary, junior high, and high school students are learning about the harmful effects and hazards of drug abuse, marijuana-abuse among university students became a social problem in the end of 2008. In response, the Headquarters has made MEXT prepare materials that aims to raise the self-awareness against drugs, and is urging universities and other higher education institutes to distribute them during the orientation session upon admission. Therefore, MEXT prepared an educational pamphlet about drug abuse prevention targeting university students, “For a Drug-free Student Life: The danger of drug abuse is surprisingly close,” which is available online on the MEXT website. This pamphlet was also sent to all public and private universities and colleges in Japan in April 2009, to be distributed to their new first-year students.

Conclusion

With today’s rapidly progressing information society and advancing transportation networks, it is likely that the problem of drug abuse could become a serious issue to anyone, anywhere—even in Japan. In order to eradicate drug abuse among young people, it will be necessary for schools, communities, and families to share a common understanding of this problem and to make continuous efforts against drug abuse. For the success of the school-based drug

abuse prevention education, understanding and cooperation from everyone involved will be

highly appreciated.

References

1. The Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse, Japan. The Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy. 1998 Mar. (in Japanese)
2. The Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse, Japan. The New Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy. 2003 Jul. (in Japanese)
3. The Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse, Japan. The Third Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy. 2008 Aug. (in Japanese)
4. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan. National Survey on Consciousness of Students on Drugs. 2007 Mar. (in Japanese)
5. National Police Agency, Japan. The Current Status of Drugs- and Arm-related Offences in Year 2008. 2009 Apr. (in Japanese)