

Opinion Poll

The Lebanese people and Tranquilizers

Lebanon has become among the countries registering a high level of tranquilizers abuse according to available estimates and based on the number of the Lebanese population. In an attempt to limit this problem, the Ministry of Public Health issued, several years ago, a decision prohibiting pharmacies from selling tranquilizers without a physician's prescription. However, this decision was not strictly implemented due to the absence of government's control on one hand and some pharmacists' aim to achieve some profits on the other. Tranquilizers were also smuggled across the Lebanese borders.

Informational International conducted an opinion poll on the use of tranquilizers in the Lebanese society. *The Monthly* met with officials in two Lebanese rehabilitation centers – Skoun and Oum El-Nour – to shed light on drug addiction in Lebanon, knowing that this problem is not only limited to Lebanon. Figures provided by the World Health Organization in 2002 show that there are “76.3 million persons with alcohol use disorders worldwide and at least 15.3 million persons who have drug use disorders”.

The impact of the political and economic situation on the Lebanese people's mood

The use of tranquilizers was widely spread among the Lebanese during the civil war. The Lebanese people have been witnessing for over two years unstable security and economic situations: explosions in different areas, assassinations, Israeli war, and rise of prices of goods, power cuts and problems in the National Social Security Fund. The overwhelming majority of respondents (82.2%) said that the country's upheavals had a “big impact” on them, while 13.9% said the impact was to a “certain extent” and 1.7% said developments had a “limited” or “zero” impact. 2.2% said “don't know”.

Moreover, 72% of respondents said the stressing situation led to the rise in the consumption of tranquilizers, while 25.4% rejected this assumption. 2.6% said “don't know”.

Consumption of Tranquilizers

Despite difficulties to give honest answers due to prevailing taboos, 6.4% of respondents admitted using sedatives, while 93.6% said they did not. (Estimates show that the percentage of Lebanese using sedatives is much higher but respondents tend to deny the issue. This was also confirmed by a previous study by *Information International*).

Out of the 6.4% who admitted using tranquilizers, 46.8% said they used it daily, 13% said they took sedative pills twice a week, 13% said once a week, 7.8% said they used them once in a month, while 18.2% said they took a pill when needed. 1.2% said they took pills only in tense situations.

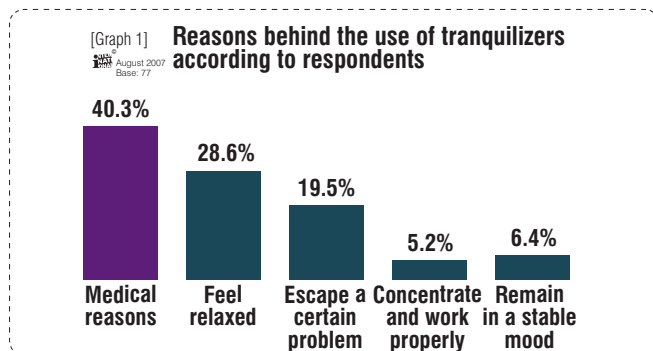
These percentages show that around 60% of those who consume sedative pills are addicted to them. The percentage of females who use tranquilizers is twice that of males. The distribution of tranquilizers users by age category is shown in Table no.1.

Age category / Do you take tranquilizers?	18-24	25-34	35-44-	45-54	55-64	65 and above
Yes	3%	6.6%	4.9%	10.8%	9.5%	7.5%
No	97%	93.4%	95.1%	89.2%	90.5%	92.5%

Source: Information International – August 2007

Why are you taking tranquilizers?

40.3% of respondents who use tranquilizers said they took these drugs for medical reasons, while 28.6% use them to “feel relaxed”, 19.5% to “escape a certain problem” and 5.2% to be able to “concentrate and work properly”. 6.4% said they used them to remain in a stable mood (Graph no. 1).



Since when have you been taking tranquilizers?

Around the quarter (26%) of respondents who reported to be taking sedative pills said they had been taking them since one to three years. 11.7% since three to five years, 9.1% since five to 10 years and 10.4% since more than 10 years. 40.3% reported to have been taking pills since three months to one year. 2.5% did not specify.

From where do you usually get your tranquilizers?

The overwhelming majority (80.5%) of those who reported to be taking tranquilizers said they were buying them from pharmacies. (75.8% of whom get them with a medical prescription and 19.4% without a prescription).

10.4% said they got them directly from the physician, while 6.5% from friends and 2.6% from merchants or did not specify (Graph no. 2).

How much do you spend on tranquilizers?

Around half of the respondents who take tranquilizers (48.1%) spend 15,000 LBP or less on sedative pills per month. 28.6% said they spent between 16,000-30,000 LBP, 10.4% between 31,000-60,000LBP and 7.8% more than 60,000 LBP. 5.1% did not specify.

Which brand of tranquilizers do you usually take?

The use of a certain brand or another depends on social levels and the purpose of use. It is noteworthy that 41.8% of respondents “don’t know” or “don’t remember” the type of sedatives they are using.

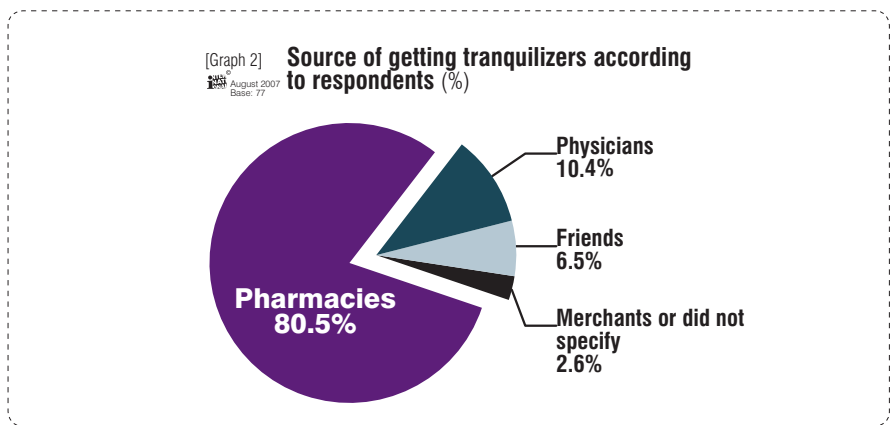
21.5% said they were taking Lexotanil of different doses, 19.9% said they were taking Xanax, 3.2% Benzhexol, 2.8% Valium and 10.8% other brands.

Do you wish to stop taking tranquilizers?

72.8% of respondents who reported to be taking tranquilizers said they desired to stop taking these pills, while 16.9% said they didn't. 10.3% did not answer. Respondents' answers by age category are shown in Table no.2.

Age category / Do you wish to stop taking tranquilizers?	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 and above
Yes	71.5%	55%	80%	77.3%	80%	100%
No	28.5%	25%	13.3%	13.6%	10%	-
No answer	-	20%	6.7%	9.1%	10%	-

Source: Information International – August 2007



Conclusion

- The majority of respondents (72%) said Lebanon's political and economic situation caused a rise in tranquilizers consumption. However, only a percentage of 6.47% admitted taking sedative pills, which is without doubt less than the actual percentage. This is due to the fact that young people in general deny taking such pills. In fact, only 3% of respondents between 18-24 years-old said they were taking pills, compared to 6.6% of people between 25-34 years-old. Estimates show that the percentage of people taking pills is much higher and even twice these percentages.
- 60% of respondents who reported to be taking sedatives might be addicted to them.
- 40.3% of respondents taking tranquilizers use them for medical reasons, while 60% for other reasons.
- The overwhelming majority of respondents who take tranquilizers (80.5%) buy them from pharmacies; however, 19.4% of those buy them without a medical prescription. This highlights violations committed by pharmacists.
- Around three-quarters of respondents wish to stop taking sedatives.

Skoun rehabilitation center conducted a study in 1999 to assess the prevalence of benzodiazepine (such as Lexotanil, Xanax and Valium) use, abuse, and dependence in Lebanon. The results revealed that 9.6% of people in Lebanon consumed benzodiazepines. Skoun's Psychiatrist and Team Coordinator Dr. Ramzi Haddad stated that at the surface 9.6% may seem like a minute percentage, yet when you compare it with global figures, it is one of the highest percentages in the world. The variables linked to the use of such drugs were the following:

a) female b) age 45 and above c) cigarette smokers d) experience of a recent life event.

An opinion poll conducted by *Information International* in 2002 showed that nervous system medicine and tranquilizers ranked second on Lebanon's medicine imports bill (19%) preceded by antibiotics (20%).

This means that the value of nervous system medicine and tranquilizers reached around 76 million USD of the total bill which amounted to 400 million USD in 2002.

Moreover, the opinion poll showed that 7.7% of university students take tranquilizers and 12.5% took illegal drugs at least one time.

1- Skoun

Skoun was established in 2003 and is the first out-patient treatment center. According to Prevention Coordinator Nadia Makdashi, Skoun treated a total of 115 patients in 2006 with the bulk of its patients ranging between 20-30 years of age, 70% male and 30% female. Addiction broken down by the type of substance consumed revealed that 65% of patients were heroin dependent while cocaine accounted for 10% and alcohol 5%. The rest of the percentage (20%) was distributed between hashish, pills, poly, and amphetamine, benzhexol, codeine, morphine, and ecstasy.

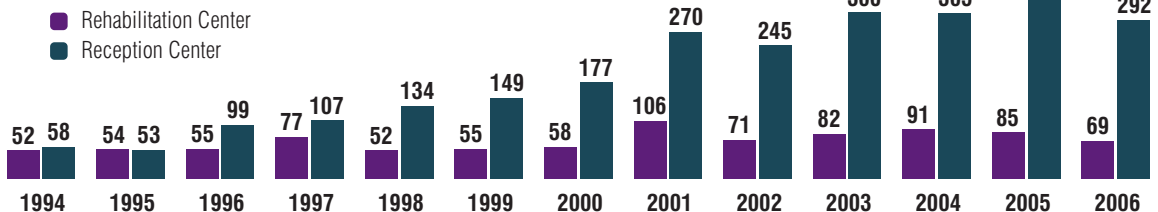
According to Ms. Makdashi, a drug named methamphetamine which is popularly being consumed by addicts in Asia and the US has made its way across Lebanon. So far there have been two cases treated; yet the level of distribution and consumption of the 'meth' drug remains unknown. Methamphetamine is a psychostimulant drug which is prescribed for those diagnosed with narcolepsy and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders. Those who abuse methamphetamine oftentimes ingest one or more benzodiazepines in order to calm down.

2- Oum El-Nour

Oum El-Nour was established in 1989 as an in-patient treatment center, its residential area is located in Sehaile and Achkout for men and Feytroun for women. Patients undergo a treatment program which lasts for a period of 12 to 15 months. Currently Oum El-Nour is nursing 60 males and 15 females. In 2006, 69% of the patients ranged from the ages of 14-19 years old, 23% between 20-29 years old, and 8% were between 30 to 40 years of age. According to Director General Mouna Yazigi, patients either enter the center for treatment request or rehabilitation. Treatment request involves those addicts who do not enter into rehab because they are either not convinced, not ready, or already undergoing diagnosis. They do however visit the reception center for counseling, awareness, and moral support. The major challenges for these patients are overcoming denial and ambivalence. Graph no. 1 illustrates the number of treatment requests versus rehabilitation at Oum El-Nour.

[Graph 1] **Treatment request Vs Rehabilitation at Oum El-Nour (1994-2006)**

Source: Oum El-Nour (2006)



Ever since Oum El-Nour was established the number of males undergoing rehabilitation has been greater than females. In 2004, 40 females were being treated and their number has not exceeded since then. Figures from Oum El-Nour in 2006 reveal that 64% of the patients were addicted to heroine, 58% to cannabis, 53% to cocaine, 43% to alcohol, 15% to ecstasy, 12% to amphetamines, and 8% to LSD (percentages exceed 100% since the patients represent multi-drug users.)