

ADDICTION HELP

BOOZE REHAB FOR

Alarmed at the increase in alcohol abuse by Dubai residents, authorities come up with a new plan to treat addicts

COVER STORY

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DUBAI The number of residents battling alcohol abuse is on the rise in the UAE where boozy brunches and binge drinking are the order of the day.

Of late, the problem has assumed such epidemic proportions that authorities are considering offering alcohol rehab services to expatriates. It's the first time this service has been offered to residents, regardless of nationality, rather than to Emiratis only.

The ground-breaking treatment plans follow a National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) report this year titled Disease Burden on Individuals and Society. It says 5.3 per cent of the total deaths in the UAE are due to alcohol use or illicit drugs, coupled with an expected "considerable proportion of hidden users".

Statistics culled from a 2010 survey by research firm Euromonitor show that alcohol consumption in the UAE has increased by an alarming 30 per cent in the past five years. At the same time, instances of alcohol abuse have also spiked. The frequency of Alcoholic Anonymous Arabia (AA Arabia) meetings which address the issue has registered a staggering 700 per cent increase, from three per week back in the early '90s to 25 per week today.

To combat the problem, Abu Dhabi-based NRC is wading into the expatriate drinking dilemma for the first time ever. In an exclusive interview with XPRESS, Hesham Farouk Al Arabi, NRC head of health, training and education, reveals details of plans to treat alcohol abuse among the expat community. It includes opening a 200-bed facility by 2014 and setting up satellite services throughout the country as part of a "washing machine" model where getting clean on a detox is

just the start.

It will be followed with clinics, therapeutic communities, psychological therapies and after-care services linking into health care and mental health, Al Arabi says.

This will be offered to all expats, regardless of nationality, although expatriates involved in violent offences will be excluded.

Al Arabi explains the treatment plans are an attempt to ease the significant burden, both economically and socially, of alcohol and substance abuse on the UAE community. He said treatment outcomes will be improved if the wider community is included.

A cost model has yet to be worked out, but treatment will be delivered within the same context as the UAE health care system. Models include cost recovery and cost subsidisations, but he says it's put into perspective when international data shows that the cost of alcohol abuse on a community is about two per cent of the country's gross domestic profit – in the UAE's case that's about \$4 billion (Dh14.64 billion).

ALARMING INCREASE

Al Arabi knows an increasing numbers of expats are battling the bottle just like Emirati patients. Evidence of this, he says, is in the number of inquiries for NRC care, 35 calls per month last year shooting up to 150 calls per month this year.

However, he says, little is known about the size or needs of the booze-fuelled problem in the UAE expat community.

He is unsure what demand there will be for the service, which perhaps is not surprising in a Muslim country where consumption of alcohol by Muslims is forbidden and where there are strict laws regulating alcohol consumption.

In June, the NRC will take a closer look at the UAE situation. At this stage, much of its planning has been based on international alcohol trends and data, but an assignment situation study to find out about the UAE scenario will start soon.



"The expansion of NRC services, in both capacity and service levels, stems from the fact that addiction is a disease with significant burden, economically and socially"

HESHAM FAROUK AL ARABI
HEAD OF HEALTH, TRAINING
AND EDUCATION, NRC

Counsellors and recovering alcoholics describe the scenario as an expat social scene saturated with alcohol, topped up at the weekend with Friday brunches. A social activity unique to the UAE, these brunches offer unlimited food and alcohol for prices ranging between Dh200 and Dh1,000.

"A number of Dubai residents are drowning in booze, unable to keep their heads above the surface," says a counsellor.

Interviews of expatriates on Dubai's drinking scene showed the call for last drinks was much in demand. However, plenty of

expats are enjoying a taste of the tittle on offer without going overboard.

British expat Gemma Daly, in Dubai for eight months, had her first five-star brunch experience this year and describes it as four hours of pure indulgence, all for Dh400.

"It tasted amazing and it was wonderful mingling with glamorous people floating around on a Friday afternoon. But as expected, a number of people in our group showed they were unable to handle their alcohol and were intent on drinking what they had paid for. They certainly got their money's worth, but the hangover was included for free," the 24 year old says.

However, others refuse to apportion blame to the city's lifestyle for their illness. Rather, they warn, the city acts as a trigger for people with the genetic make-up to suffer from alcoholism.

XPRESS spoke to AA Arabia members, agreeing to its request for surnames to be withheld. One

of the main dangers that frequently arose in the talks was isolation.

It seems alcohol and loneliness make great drinking buddies. American resident Becky says this is amplified in Dubai where most expatriates are stripped of family, friends and any close support, while the devil's drink is ready to fill that place. Becky, 55, sobered up after relocating to Chicago where she looked for comfort and company at the bottom of her wine glass, but says if she hadn't hit rock bottom there, it could have easily been in Dubai where expats face similar issues.

MISCONCEPTIONS GONE

The reality, says former Dubai alcoholic, Sarah, is that most people suffer from alcohol abuse before arriving in the emirate. The misconception among many is that alcohol will be difficult to come by in a Muslim state, so their problem will disappear. But, not so, she says. Dubai's social scene allows you to have a weekend every day of the week.