



Public Health Implications of Excessive Use of the Internet, Computers, Smartphones and Similar Electronic Devices

Meeting report

Main Meeting Hall, Foundation for Promotion of Cancer Research
National Cancer Research Centre, Tokyo, Japan
27-29 August 2014



**World Health
Organization**



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Report overview

This report provides a summary of the three-day meeting held in Tokyo on 27-29 August 2014. As described in the **Background** and **Meeting objectives** sections of this report, the meeting was held in order to discuss public health implications of excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and other electronic devices in the context of “behavioural addictions” associated with such excessive use. The term “behavioural addictions” is not part of the official nomenclature used by the World Health Organization (WHO) and, as a diagnostic group, was not included in the 10th International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10). However, the term “behavioural addictions” has become increasingly used in the scientific literature and in preparation of the meeting. Hence, the current report uses “behavioural addictions” as the best available term to describe a range of conditions under consideration at the meeting, without prejudice to any future decision regarding its place in WHO nomenclature.

The section on **Meeting format** introduces the eight main topics discussed at the meeting (scope, epidemiology, comorbidity, phenomenology, diagnosis, classification and management of the disorders as well as public health policy and health system responses). It also gives a short overview of the meeting programme and participants, which are listed in full in **Appendix A** and **Appendix B**.

The section titled **Review** focuses on the expert inputs made at the meeting. However, this section is not a detailed summary of each presentation. Background papers related to this section are in **Appendix C**.

Sections titled **Conclusions** and **Next steps** provide an overview of the future direction. In particular, the meeting participants recommended three concrete programme activities for WHO in this area. Some of these activities have already been started at the time of writing this report.

Background

The use of the Internet, computers, mobile phones, smartphones and other electronic devices has dramatically increased over the last decades in all parts of the world. This may promote public health with respect to provision of information, facilitation of pro-social activities and other factors. However, this increase is also associated with documented cases of excessive use that warrant consideration.

Given that the patterns and extent of use vary widely (at individual and population levels), there is continuing debate on how best to define such excessive use from a public health perspective. Currently, behavioural addictions are usually characterized by often irresistible urge, impulse or drive to repeatedly engage in an activity (non-substance use) and an inability to reduce or cease this behaviour (loss of control) despite serious negative consequences to the person's physical, mental, social and/or financial well-being. Within this context are often considered behavioural disorders or excessive behaviours associated with gambling, viewing pornography, video gaming, internet-based single-player and multi-player gaming, excessive use of various social media, smartphone applications (apps) and similar electronic devices.

The scope of this problem has reached the magnitude of a significant public health concern in some jurisdictions. Others are yet to experience this concern as the use of the Internet and other electronic devices increases further globally. Hence, there is a need to identify feasible and successful public policy and health services responses.

With this in view, the meeting in Tokyo on 27-29 August 2014 was held in order to review available information related to health conditions associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and other electronic devices, including conditions considered as “behavioural addictions”.

Meeting objectives

The meeting had the following four objectives:

1. Review the available evidence on epidemiology, nature, phenomenology, outcomes and public health implications of health conditions associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices;
2. Review clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines of behavioural addictions associated with excessive use of the Internet and computers in the current classifications systems of mental and behavioural disorders;
3. Review the available public policy and health system responses from different parts of the world including their feasibility, effectiveness, costs and public health benefits;
4. Develop suggestions for WHO’s further programme activities in this area.

Meeting format

The meeting was conducted over three days in Tokyo, Japan. The meeting programme included 13 plenary sessions structured around the following eight discussion topics (see Appendix A for full programme):

1. **Scope** of health conditions under consideration. Behavioural addictions associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices. Boundaries with normality. Scope of health and social consequences due to excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices.
2. **Epidemiology** of disorders associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices. Measurement challenges. Available epidemiological data.
3. **Comorbid conditions**. Psychosocial factors influencing development and outcomes of the disorders under consideration.
4. **Phenomenology and natural course** of disorders associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices.

5. **Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines** of disorders associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices. Diagnostic instruments.
6. Disorders associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices in the **classifications** of mental and behavioural disorders.
7. Identification and **management** of disorders and health conditions associated with excessive use of the Internet, computers, smartphones and similar electronic devices.
8. **Public policy and health system responses**. Feasibility, effectiveness, costs and public health benefits. Case studies from represented countries.

***Note:** for the purposes of readability, the titles of the above meeting sessions have been simplified (based on the text shown in bold) in the main text of this meeting report.*

The meeting was attended by 19 participants and 24 observers (see Appendix B for a full list of participants). Dr Susumu Higuchi (Director of the National Hospital Organization Kurihama Medical and Addiction Centre) was elected as Chair of the meeting.

Overview of the meeting deliberations

The following section provides an overview of the meeting discussions on each of the eight discussion topics, i.e. scope, epidemiology, comorbidity, phenomenology and clinical course, clinical description and diagnostic guidelines, classification and management as well as public policy and health system responses. Notably, the following section is not a detailed summary of each presentation or of the topic as a whole. Further details on these topics can be found in the background papers provided in Appendix C.

1. Scope

Since introduction of the “World Wide Web” in 1990 the availability and use of the Internet and digital technology has considerably increased throughout the world. By now the Internet has become integrated into the occupational social and

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