

## THE CONCEPT OF VULNERABILITY AND ITS APPLICATION TO DRUG USE DISORDERS

DOI: 10.5935/2238-3182.20150029

How can we integrate the concept of vulnerability to substance use disorders? How this concept can contribute to our understanding of the risk of damage, possibility of prevention, and harm reduction?

When considered together, alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs are involved in 12% of the worldwide mortality, and thus constitute a major cause of death that can be prevented. These substances account for approximately 10% of the global burden of diseases.<sup>1,2</sup> However, these indicators refer to a minority of the drug user population, i.e., those who have a disorder from substance use such as abusive use or drug addiction. We also know that despite the high frequency of experimentation and drug use in life, only a minority of people progress to abuse or dependency. The question that then arises is how to identify who will evolve or not to abuse or addiction.

It seems that the concept of vulnerability can help to better answer this question. The propensity of chemical dependency can be divided into three levels of vulnerability. The first level covers sociodemographic, population (e.g., culture and geographic location), or individual factors (e.g., age, gender, educational level, race, and special needs). The second level corresponds to the psychological and psychiatric aspects that turn out to reflect or determine the choices, preferences, experiences, or individual problems (eg. type of drug used, its action, the user's perception regarding the substance use, and the value assigned to it). The third level relates to the biological and genetic factors that will determine the physiological effects of a drug and its addicting valence.<sup>3</sup> This three-levels establish interactions at all times, associating and constantly changing the degree of vulnerability to dependence.

In the health field, understanding the vulnerabilities that people are exposed to is to understand not only the conditions that can leave them in a vulnerable position exposing them to illness, but also the resources that each individual or social group has to face these weaknesses.

### References

1. World Health Organization-WHO. World Health Organization report on the global tobacco epidemic. Geneva: WHO Press; 2009.
2. World Health Organization-WHO. Global health risks. Mortality and burden of diseases attributable to selected major risks. Geneva: WHO Press; 2009.
3. Swendsen J, Le Moal M. Individual vulnerability to addiction. *Ann N Y Acad Sci.* 2011; 1216:73-85.

**Frederico Garcia**

Coordinator of the Reference Center in Drugs of UFMG.

Leader of the Center for Research in Drugs, Vulnerability, and Risk Behaviors to Health – UFMG.

Professor at the Department of Mental Health, UFMG, School of Medicine. Full Psychiatrist at the Brazilian Psychiatric Association. Ph.D. in Molecular Medicine at the University of Rouen, France.