UK dental undergraduates — a survey of alcohol and drug use

A survey of alcohol and drug use among UK based dental undergraduates by B. Underwood and K. Fox Br Dent J 2000; 189: 314-317

Objective
This study was designed to investigate the prevalence of alcohol and drug use.

Design
Anonymous self-report questionnaire

Setting
A UK dental school in May 1998

Subjects and methods
1st–5th year dental undergraduates (n=264) were questioned on their use of alcohol and tobacco, cannabis and other illicit drugs whilst at dental school, and before entry.

Results
Eighty two per cent of male and 90% of female undergraduates reported drinking alcohol. Of those drinking, 63% of males and 42% of females drank in excess of sensible weekly limits (14 units for females, 21 units for males), with 56% of males and 58.5% of females 'binge drinking'. Regular tobacco smoking (10 or more cigarettes a day) was found to have a statistically significant association with year of study, 4th-5th year undergraduates being eight times more likely to regularly smoke than their junior colleagues. Fifty five per cent of undergraduates reported cannabis use at least once or twice since starting dental school, with 8% of males and 6% of females reporting current regular use at least once a week.

Conclusion
Dental undergraduates are drinking above sensible weekly limits of alcohol, binge drinking and indulging in illicit drug use. Dental Schools should designate a teacher responsible for education of undergraduates regarding alcohol and substance abuse.

In Brief
- This paper highlights the extent of alcohol and drug use among UK dental undergraduates.
- It also emphasises the need for further education and counselling in this area.

Comment

This report comes at a time when there is concern that an increasing number of dental practitioners are requiring help for addiction problems. The Dentists Health Support Trust which finances the Dentists Health Support Programme is aware that more dentists are requiring help, particularly for drug addiction, and an increasing number of younger practitioners are being referred to the Programme for alcohol and drug related problems. It is possible that these could start to develop prior to and during the time of undergraduate training.

This paper reviewed the evidence of the use of alcohol and non-prescribed drugs among UK school children, university undergraduates in general and medical students in particular. No significant information existed regarding dental students.

During the study all 264 undergraduates at one UK dental school were surveyed using an anonymous self-report questionnaire. There were 200 useable responses. Sixty three per cent of males and 42% females drank alcohol in excess of sensible weekly limits, which is at levels similar to those reported by students in general. However, with 56% of males and 58.5% of females 'binge drinking' this is double the rate found in university students in general. Hazardous drinking was reported by 13% of males and 7% of females. Seventy one per cent reported their alcohol intake was greater than it was prior to becoming a dental undergraduate.

Cannabis was used regularly by 8% of male and 6% of female dental students compared with 23% and 16% of students in general. However, 44% of males and 26% of females had reported using cannabis more than once or twice and 45% of males and 34% of females reported illicit drug use other than cannabis while an undergraduate. Given that over half of dental undergraduates in this study reported having used a Class B illegal drug, and in doing so, irrespective of health risks, risk possible criminal convictions, the ramifications for future employment or registration are obvious. However, regular use of these drugs was found to be rare. The report refers to unpublished data from a recent survey of 75% of all vocational dental practitioners which revealed a similar level of alcohol and drug use during their time as undergraduates. The authors suggest that this would support the view that the findings from the dental school surveyed were not unique to that particular school.

The authors recommend that longitudinal studies of those participating in this study should be undertaken to monitor drug and alcohol use during vocational training and beyond and include assessment of stress levels. In addition they suggest that undergraduate dental schools should designate a teacher responsible for educating students about alcohol and substance abuse and for monitoring the impact of such information.

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