

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Drinking and drug use in VDPs

Alcohol and drug use among vocational dental practitioners

B. Underwood, K. Fox and P. J. Nixon *Br Dent J* 2003; 195: 265–268

Objective

This study was designed to investigate the prevalence of alcohol and drug use in vocational dental practitioners (VDPs).

Design

Anonymous self-report questionnaire.

Subjects and methods

All UK vocational dental practitioners (n = 719) who started practice in the summer of 1999 were questioned on their use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other illicit drugs whilst a VDP and before graduation.

Results

Eighty-nine per cent of males and 88% of females reported alcohol use. Of these, 35% of males and 36% of females drank above sensible levels (up to 21 units per week for males, 14 units for females), with 48% of males and 52% of females 'binge drinking'. Thirty-three per cent of respondents reported cannabis use whilst a VDP. Regular drug use (use at least once a month) other than cannabis whilst a VDP was found to be highest among males, with regular ecstasy use reported by 4% and regular cocaine use reported by 2%. Regular tobacco use (ten or more cigarettes per day) was reported by 9% of VDPs. Regular tobacco users were found to be six times more likely to use cannabis on a regular basis, three times more likely to use ecstasy on a regular basis and four times more likely to use cocaine on a regular basis than those VDPs who reported non regular tobacco use.

Conclusion

VDPs are drinking above sensible limits, binge drinking, using tobacco and indulging in illicit drug use to a degree that will cause health problems. However, use of all substances had reduced since qualification.

IN BRIEF

- A study of alcohol and drug use by vocational dental practitioners (VDPs).
- VDPs are using alcohol and drugs to a degree that will cause health problems.
- This paper is intended to promote a more scientific approach to the prevention, intervention and treatment of problematic alcohol and drug use in the profession.

COMMENT

This paper follows a previous study undertaken in 1998 which surveyed the pattern of alcohol and drug use in a sample of UK dental undergraduates and reported concerns about alcohol intakes above sensible weekly limits, binge drinking and the use of illicit drugs. Another study which sampled a cohort of dental students in one dental school during their second undergraduate year and subsequently after their VDP year found a high proportion were drinking excessively, taking cannabis and experimenting with other illicit drugs as undergraduates and continuing this behaviour as dental practitioners.

In addition to any concern the GDC and the public would have regarding these findings, the concerns of the profession were highlighted in a booklet produced by The Dentists' Health Support Trust in 2000 that described the devastating effects of addiction on individuals, their families and colleagues.

This paper sampled, by means of an anonymously administered questionnaire, all UK vocational dental practitioners (n=719) who started practice in the summer of 1999 in order to assess if the results of the smaller study were representative of all UK VDPs.

There was a 75% response rate equally distributed between males and females. The results showed that 9% of VDPs smoked 10 or more cigarettes per day with a higher prevalence in males than females.

Eighty-nine per cent of males and 88% of females reported current alcohol use. Of these 35% of males and 36% females were drinking in excess of the recommended sensible levels and 6% of males and 2% of females exceeded the 'hazardous' threshold. Binge drinking, drinking at least half the recommended weekly units of alcohol in one session, was reported by 48% of male and 52% of female VDPs.

Fourteen per cent of respondents had used cannabis once or twice, a further 14% had used cannabis more than once or twice and 5% are or had been regular users as VDPs. Twenty-two per cent of males and 11% of females reported having used illicit drugs and inhalants as VDPs.

The reported use of alcohol, cannabis and other illicit drugs had all decreased on graduation, however in some instances remaining at a level where personal harm is possible. The paper raises the question of whether the use of alcohol and drugs is impacting on patient care which the authors say cannot be answered by the results of this study.

Andrew Lamb, Senior Lecturer,
University of Glasgow Dental School
doi:10.1038/sj.bdj.4810472