

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Alcohol and drug use among dental and law undergraduates

A comparison of alcohol and drug use among dental undergraduates and a group of non-medical, professional undergraduates

M. W. Barber and A. Fairclough *Br Dent J* 2006; 201: 581–584

Objective

To compare the alcohol and drug use of dental and law undergraduates.

Design

Anonymous self-report questionnaire.

Subjects and methods

All dental undergraduates (n = 263) and a randomly selected group of law undergraduates (n = 180) from the same university were questioned on their use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs.

Results

Current tobacco use was reported by 7% of dental students and 19% of law students. Alcohol use was reported by 86% of dental students and 88% of law students, with 44% of dental students and 52% of law students estimating they drank above recommended safe limits (14 units for females, 21 units for men). Binge drinking was reported by 71% of dental students and 75% of law students, with weekly binge drinking reported by 27% and 34% of dental and law students respectively. Cannabis experience was reported by 44% of dental students and 52% of law students, with current use reported by 12% and 25% of dental and law students respectively. A small proportion of dental and law students reported using other Class A and B drugs including ecstasy, amphetamines and cocaine.

Conclusions

Dental students appear to be indulging in similar levels of alcohol and illicit drug use when compared to students of a different, non-medical faculty. Binge drinking may be more prevalent than previously thought, with potential risks to health, patient safety and professional status.

IN BRIEF

- A study comparing alcohol and drug use between dental and law undergraduates.
- Dental students are indulging in high levels of alcohol and drug use similar to other groups of professional students.
- This study suggests a role for professional bodies such as the GDC to be more proactive in the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse amongst students.

COMMENT

Alcohol and drug misuse among medical and dental professionals has long been a recognised problem and not only can lead to serious health problems but is one of the criteria for a GDC 'Fitness to Practise' referral. This study compares the alcohol and drug use of dental students with that of law students, who are also regulated by a professional body.

With respect to alcohol, law students were shown to drink statistically more units per week than the dental students, although over 70% of both cohorts took part in binge drinking. This has a serious implication as binge drinking is associated with alcoholism and antisocial behaviour, which in turn could lead to serious professional misconduct.

Tobacco usage was reported by 7% of dental students and 19% of law students, with the majority of law students smoking more cigarettes per day than dental students. The percentage of dental students smoking is lower than in previous studies, which may be due to the medical education given to the dental students regarding the harmful effects of smoking. It is important therefore to extend this approach across the whole university sector so that it may benefit the health of all students.

The most commonly used illegal drug was cannabis, which 12% of dental students (and a significantly higher 25% of law students) admitted to using currently. This is obviously worrying in that cannabis can take several days to be excreted from the body, with the resulting effect on patient care. Even more worrying was that a small number (4%) of dental students were current users of Class A drugs.

Interestingly, of those students in the high risk drinking group (>50 units per week for males, >35 units per week for females), 100% admitted to binge drinking, 50% currently used cannabis and 20% currently used ecstasy. As most students are willing to disclose how much alcohol they drink per week but may be more reluctant to admit to smoking or drug use, it may be a way of targeting those students who may benefit from both alcohol and drug counselling to prevent more serious problems in the future. This may be a duty of care of the higher educational institution but it may also be appropriate that a national alcohol and drug misuse programme for medical and dental undergraduates should be established.

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