Summary of: Tobacco, alcohol and drug use among dental undergraduates at one English university in 1998 and 2008

FULL PAPER DETAILS

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Objective To estimate the prevalence of tobacco, alcohol and drug use among dental undergraduates at one English university in 2008, and compare these with prevalence in 1998. **Design** Cross-sectional survey using an anonymous self-report questionnaire. **Subjects and methods** In 2008 all 384 dental undergraduates at one English university were sent a questionnaire in order to obtain data on the frequency and amount of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and other illicit drugs used before and during their time as a dental undergraduate. The same survey had been conducted on dental undergraduates at the university 10 years earlier. **Results** Tobacco smoking was reported by 27% of males and 13.5% of females, a reduction from 1998 (42% of males and 32% of females) being significant among females. 63% of males and 69.5% of females reported drinking alcohol: significantly fewer than in 1998 (82% males and 90% females). Binge drinking was reported by 69.5% of males compared to 56% in 1998. In females 66% binged compared to 58.5% in 1998. The increase in males was significant. 62% of males and 68% of females had never used cannabis compared to 38% in males and 50.5% of females in 1998, a significant reduction. A significant reduction in amphetamine use was reported among both male and female undergraduates in 2008 compared to 1998 and a significant increase in amyl nitrate use was reported by females. Reported illicit drug use was associated with alcohol drinking, and particularly with tobacco use. **Conclusion** Dental undergraduates at one English university in 2008 when compared to those in 1998 are reported to be significantly less likely to drink alcohol, use cannabis and amphetamines. If female, they are significantly less likely to smoke tobacco and overestimate the number of units of alcohol they can safely consume in a week, but more likely to use amyl nitrate. If male, those who drink alcohol are significantly less likely to drink at a level of increased risk, but more likely to binge drink.

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

One important advantage of research surveys is that they have the scope to be repeated over a number of years and so provide the opportunity to record how the results change over time and with successive survey groups. This is particularly useful with a subject such as drug and alcohol use, where information on national trends is available for comparison.

This study by Underwood *et al.* looks at the self-reported prevalence of tobacco, drug and alcohol use in dental undergraduates in 2008 and compares the results with those of an earlier study undertaken in 1998. Encouragingly, the results show decreases in use in many areas, with smoking in female students

and alcohol drinking, cannabis and amphetamine use in both males and females showing statistically significant reductions when compared with the 1998 data. However, binge drinking had increased significantly in males since 1998 – a trend that is also reflected in national data.

The study also showed that reported drug use was associated with alcohol drinking and particularly with tobacco smoking. These findings are potentially useful for designing drug advice and education programmes, enabling the advice to be targeted at the groups (such as smokers) to whom it would provide the most benefit.

The authors acknowledge that there are limitations to their study design

and it would be naive to imagine that the results provide the full picture of drug, alcohol and tobacco use among dental undergraduates. However, when interpreted and used carefully, the findings of the two studies help to establish an evidence base on which to build future education for dental students, and add detail to the national picture of substance use.

The full paper can be accessed from the *BDJ* website (www.bdj.co.uk), under 'Research' in the table of contents for Volume 208 issue 4.

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IN BRIEF

- Current information on levels of substance use in the general population.
- 'Binge drinking' defined.
- Sensible levels of alcohol use discussed.
- Update on changes in illegal drug classification over the past decade.
- Trends in substance use over the past decade among dental undergraduates and different groups reported.

COMMENT

Alcohol and drug misuse among young people has been a focus of media attention in recent years, especially regarding the link to antisocial behaviour and effects on health. Previous research has shown that dental students indulge in alcohol and drug use, which raises questions regarding the effects on patient care and the profession as a whole.

This current study expands on previous research in this area by aiming to compare tobacco, alcohol and drug use among dental undergraduates at one English university in 1998 and 2008. Encouragingly, the results show a general trend towards reductions in tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use. Significantly fewer undergraduates reported drinking alcohol and of those drinking alcohol there was a general reduction in the amounts consumed. There was also an apparent increase in awareness of safe drinking levels. However, there was an increase in the prevalence of binge drinking reported by male students.

Some important points should be considered when interpreting these results. The first is the significant increase in the number of students who consume no alcohol. The authors suggest that this is likely to be due to an increase in the numbers of ethnic minority students, although cannot confirm this as this information was not asked for due to confidentiality reasons. Another consideration is the change in guidelines between the 1998 and 2008 study stating that a glass of

wine is now considered to be two units rather than one. The authors state that they cannot analyse the effect of this change as they did not ask the students to specify type of alcohol consumed. However, regardless of this change, the general trend is towards a decrease in alcohol consumption.

Overall these trends towards lower levels of alcohol and drug use can be regarded as positive and could be a result of a number of interventions such as recent changes in smoking legislation and increased awareness of the health and social issues involved. The author himself states that he provides educational lectures to dental undergraduates at the University involved. Further research into the success of such interventions is warranted and if shown to be successful such programmes could be developed for dental schools across the country.

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AUTHOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**1. Why did you undertake this research?**

We wanted to repeat our 1998 study to allow a comparison of trends in substance use in the dental undergraduate population with those in the general population to be made, to observe if dental undergraduates differ in any respect. If there were marked difference in the trends seen between the two populations and use of any substance, this would suggest the need for further research to identify the reason. Further, the results will allow a more evidence-based approach to the education of undergraduates about substance use. Unhealthy patterns of tobacco, alcohol and drug use developed as an undergraduate may well continue post qualification and have serious consequences for an individual's professional future and general well-being. It is also important to protect the public who may receive poor care as a result of alcohol and drug use by dentists.

2. What would you like to do next in this area to follow on from this work?

Our ambition is to introduce an alcohol education program for dental undergraduates, which would aim to encourage the sensible use of alcohol, reducing the risk of possible harm to themselves and their patients. The information obtained from this study and future repeats will be one of the measures used to evaluate the program's effectiveness. Further, undergraduates who have completed an alcohol education program will be in the ideal position to screen their patients and provide advice regarding the sensible use of alcohol, giving brief interventions to hazardous and harmful drinkers.