Dubai Medical College Students’ Attitudes towards Substance Use

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Abstract

Background: In recent years there has been an increasing trend towards psychoactive substance use among youth, especially medical students.

Aims: To assess Dubai Medical College for Girls students’ attitudes towards substance use and their use of substances. Participants: One hundred and three female medical students were selected randomly and were evaluated.

Measurements: A confidential questionnaire was distributed, completed by the students and collected in the same sessions in 2007.

Results: Of the subjects, 8.92% reported usage of substance(s) once or more sometime during their lives. Only 4.90% were currently using substance. The most common reason for initiation of substance use was to find out what it was like for most of the substances. Most of the students reported religion as the most important reason for not using substances. Most of the students reported radio/television and newspaper/magazine as the usual source of information about substances.

Conclusions: Tobacco was found to be the most prevalent form of substance use. There was no report of ecstasy, cocaine, LSD or heroin use. Drug use among Dubai Medical College students is much lower than that reported in the West.

Keywords: Attitudes; Substance use; Medical students

Introduction

Use of psychoactive substances among the youth especially medical students is a major concern among researchers and policy makers. Therefore, it is of interest to examine the lifestyles of today's medical students—tomorrow's physicians who will be involved in future health care. There are three important reasons why substance use in medical students is of particular interest [1]. Firstly, they will as physicians, treat patients with substance problems, and their own attitudes towards substance may influence their professional behavior. Secondly, the possible high prevalence of substance problems among physicians [2], and thirdly, substance use may negatively influence the academic achievement of medical students.

The majority of the studies are from the West especially the US and the UK [1,3,4,] and some of them are from developing countries [5-9].

Smoking prevalence in Turkish students has been reported to be 42.5% [10].

In a research assessing the prevalence of substance abuse among Iranian College students, 24% of the students reported using substance at sometime during their lives, but 75% reported never having used substances. Large majority (99%) of the subjects used this substance with friends or at parties. The prevalence of substance use has been found generally to be high among males than females [11]. A recent study showed that substance use among Iranian University students is still lower than that reported in the West [12]. Saeed et al. reported that 64.5% of Saudi adults in Riyadh had never smoked [13].

The goal of this research is to assess Dubai Medical College for Girls students’ attitudes towards substance use.

Materials and Method

Of the pre-clinical medical students at Dubai Medical College for Girls, 103 were selected by random cluster sampling and were administered a self-report Alcohol and Drug Use Questionnaire. The reasons behind choosing a multiple-choice questionnaire are to limit the responding time, and to elicit more specific and objective answers. This questionnaire is carefully worded in order to make it straightforward as possible. The alcohol and drug questionnaire were distributed, completed by the students, and collected in the same session. Distribution was followed by a full explanation of the reasons for the implementation of the study and the students were informed that their responses would be confidential.

The students were given enough time to complete and return the questionnaire. It includes a number of questions on age, marital status, grade, residence, nationality of the participants and their attitudes towards psychoactive drugs/substances (tobacco, alcohol, opioids, ecstasy, hashish/marijuana, other) and also their use of drugs (ever or during the 6 months prior to the study).

This study was approved by Dubai Medical College for Girls’ Committee. Statistical analysis (mean, frequency, percent) was done by SPSS version 15.

Results

Out of 103 questionnaires distributed among the students, 103 were returned, 1 of which was incomplete and was excluded from the survey.

The mean age for the students was 18.85 year (Minimum: 17, Maximum: 22, SD: 0.99). Of the subjects, 78 (76.5%) were between 18 and 19 years old and 102 (99%) were single.

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Of the subjects, 8.92% reported usage of substance(s) once or more sometime during their lives: tobacco (7.84%), alcohol (1%), opioids (1%), and cannabis (1%). Only 4.90% of the students were currently using substances: tobacco (3.92%), alcohol (1%), opioids (1%), and cannabis (1%). Some used or were using more than one substance. Subjects reported friends/acquaintances as the most prevalent source for opium, alcohol and cannabis used for the first time. The most common reported reason for experiencing tobacco was to find out what it was like.

Table 1 lists the reported reasons why students did not try substances. The majority of the students reported religion as the most important inhibiting factor for substance use.

Table 2 presents the students’ sources of information about substances. Students reported radio/television, newspaper/magazine and books as the most common sources of information, respectively.

**Discussion**

A study in the US showed that 70% of American college students had tried smoking [14]. In a study conducted by Singh et al. dealing with substance use in the West, 70% of undergraduate students had tried substances in the past, the commonest was alcohol (58%) followed by tobacco (36%) [15]. Daughton et al. reported that 84% of high-school seniors reported a previous history of alcohol use [16]. A survey conducted in Portugal indicated that 64.2% of the students had never experienced tobacco smoking [17]. A survey in Iran showed that 75% of the Iranian university students had never tried any substance [11]. A study conducted in Africa reported that alcohol was the commonest “ever used” substance (34.9%), then tobacco (18.3%) [18].

In our study, unlike the findings of studies in the West, only 8.92% of the students reported usage of substance(s) once or more sometime during their lives which is much lower than the results reported in the above-mentioned studies. This difference with Western studies is to be expected as Islam prohibits the use of substances especially alcohol.

According to our results, substances are mostly obtained from and used in the company of peers, friends and acquaintances. A study in Iran showed that most of the students generally used substances with friends or at parties [11]. Therefore, the results of our study are similar in part to some studies done in the West [19]. Peer influence has been used as excuses for some substance-seeking and substance-taking behavior for long time. We must look harder into the reasons for substance use and not agree with these concepts or teach our youth that this is what is really happening [20].

Regarding the reasons for substance use, the majority had experienced substances to find out what they were like. A survey conducted in Iran showed that the majority of the Iranian university students who had tried substances used them for social or pleasurable purposes [11], which is different from what is reported in our study. Only a small number of our students reported substance use to help them concentrate. The reasons for substance use have been changing and social attitudes toward substance use have fluctuating, however, substance use has remained. In a survey in Malaysia, Yaacob and Abdullah indicated social influence and cigarette advertisements as the main reasons listed for initiating smoking in Malaysian university students [21]. A study done in China indicated that the main reasons for initial smoking were stress (42.8%), curiosity (34.4%) and loneliness (33.7%), respectively [22].

Table 1 lists the reasons for not using substances. The most common reported reasons were religion, health damage and lack of interest, respectively. In order not to use substances, youth need more encouragements. Attention must be paid to non-users as well as to users. For instance, the major reason for not using substances given by the subjects could be explained to other youth for substance education and prevention, e.g. the complications and adverse effects of substance use on mental and physical health, performance, relationship with others, social prestige, self-respect, and religious beliefs.

Among the students, those who had used substances obtained them from others. Therefore, legal prohibition of substances may decrease substance use indirectly [23]. In addition, a study conducted in Iran showed that exposure to substance in university influenced substance use more than parental influence [11]. This is in accordance with a survey done in Pakistan, which showed that negative legal sanctions could delay the start of opium use [24]. Therefore, inaccessibility and unavailability of substance may act as a preventive factor against substance consumption.

Most of the information about substances was obtained from radio and television programs, followed by newspapers/magazines and books. A study in the US showed that 70% of American college students had tried smoking [14]. In a study conducted by Singh et al. dealing with substance use in the West, 70% of undergraduate students had tried substances in the past, the commonest was alcohol (58%) followed by tobacco (36%) [15]. Daughton et al. reported that 84% of high-school seniors reported a previous history of alcohol use [16]. A survey conducted in Portugal indicated that 64.2% of the students had never experienced tobacco smoking [17]. A survey in Iran showed that 75% of the Iranian university students had never tried any substance [11]. A study conducted in Africa reported that alcohol was the commonest “ever used” substance (34.9%), then tobacco (18.3%) [18].

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books. A previous study showed that television was an important source of information about substances [25]. Agahi and Spencer suggested that preventive programs should target individuals' characteristics [26]. Jensen et al. reported that students were interested in substance education programs [27]. Providing an educational program to change attitudes needs to take into account the individual's baseline of beliefs about substances as gathered by his/her social experience [27]. Gerevich and Bácskai showed that beliefs were one of the most important protective factors against drug use [28].

As in all self-report and epidemiological surveys, this study has limitations including: recall bias, and reporting errors. In spite of assuring the confidentiality, there is probability that some of the students did not answer all the questions accurately and also substance use is socially and legally prohibited in UAE, therefore, there is probability of underreporting. In addition, the subjects were only Dubai Medical College Girls students; therefore, care should be taken not to generalize the results of this study to all UAE students. Larger studies at the community level must be carried out to reach a more representative picture of substance use in UAE.

Conclusions

According to our research study tobacco was found to be the most prevalent form of substance use. There was no report of ecstasy, cocaine, LSD or heroin use. Substance use in students of Dubai Medical College for Girls is much lower than that reported in the West. Cultural attitudes toward substance use were found to affect the type and amount of use. Our results suggest that although Dubai Medical College for Girls students are not at risk of substance abuse, it should not be underestimated, and the risk factors as well as the protective factors must be identified in nation-wide studies.

These findings can be considered when planning substance preventive programs relevant to United Arab Emirates culture.

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References


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