

Drug consumption among university students in Austria

Sir,

Prevalence data on drug use among young people in Austria is presently based on school surveys [1]. The primary aim of the present study was to assess for the first time the prevalence and trends of drug consumption among Austrian university students. A questionnaire, which was anonymous and voluntary, was administered in person by two investigators during scheduled lecture hours. A response rate of 97% was obtained from students present and 873 students (298 men, 575 women), mean age 22.1 years, completed the questionnaire.

Average age of the first contact with alcoholic beverages was 15.5 years and 2.5% of students reported daily drinking, respectively, with significantly higher proportion of men than women ($p < 0.001$). The current study examined also the relationship between problem alcohol use by self-administered questionnaires using the CAGE questionnaire. 22.8% of the students showed clinical relevant problems with alcohol drinking and 1.8% and alcohol dependence. The most common illicit drugs with monthly use were marijuana (11.1%), amphetamines (0.1%), ecstasy (0.9%), cocaine (2.2%), crack (0.1%), hallucinogens (2.4%), LSD (1.1%) GHB (0.3%) and morphine (0.1%). Another important finding was that 28.2% of the students reported a monthly use of pain medications. Laxative medications were used by 1.6%. 2.6% of the students showed a clinical relevant BDI (beck depression inventory) score.

How accurate is this picture? In a recent Austrian study among pupils (aged 13–18) it was found that 22% had already used cannabis [1]. In the case of all other substances, the prevalence rates were lower than 5% (amphetamines/stimulating substances: 5%; ecstasy: 3%; cocaine: 2%; LSD: 2%; heroin: 1%). With regard to cannabis, the study also found that the share of pupils who use cannabis regularly is rising and that the age of first use is going down.

However, as pointed out elsewhere [2], non-attenders at lectures are most likely to be those with relatively high levels of alcohol and/or drug consumption, and this bias would tend to lead to underestimation of these variables.

Since it was stressed that the questionnaire was anonymous, it seems likely that the information given by those completing it was generally reliable.

In conclusion, the high consumption of alcohol, and other substances by today's students in Austria shown by this study must be a cause for concern. Several authors since 1990 have suggested a need for better education for students on the health risks associated with alcohol and recreational drugs [2–5]. Perhaps education could be improved and other approaches explored. Prospective studies in which cohorts of students are followed from entrance to school through the university grades should be implemented to establish whether lifestyles and drug consumption change over this period.

Salvatore Giacomuzzi, Elisabeth Stempf,
Katharina Stempf-Al-Jazrawi, and Klaus Garber

References

1. Uhl A, Bohrn K, Fenk R, Grimm G, Kobrna U, Springer A, Lantschik E (2005) ESPAD Austria 2003: Europäische Schüler- und Schülerinnenstudie zu Alkohol und anderen Drogen Band 1: Forschungsbericht Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Frauen, Wien
2. Webb E, Ashton CH, Kelly P, Kamali F (1996) Alcohol and drug use in UK university students. *Lancet* 348: 922–925
3. Ashton CH, Kamali F (1995) Personality, lifestyles, alcohol and drug consumption in a sample of British medical students. *Med Educ* 29: 187–192
4. Wright JD, Pearl L (1995) Knowledge and experience of young people regarding drug misuse, 1969–1994. *Br Med J* 309: 20–24
5. Ritson E B (1990) Teaching medical students about alcohol. *Br Med J* 301: 134–135

Correspondence: Univ.-Doz. DDr. S. Giacomuzzi, University Department of Psychiatry, Medical University Innsbruck, Anichstraße 35, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria, E-mail: salvatore.giacomuzzi@i-med.ac.at