

Substance use among Students — The Road to Oblivion

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Substance abuse is an expanding public health problem which is of global concern. Tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and stimulant drug use is widely prevalent among students from various fields including the medical students. WHO reports a burden of worldwide substance use of around 2 billion alcohol users, 1.3 billion smokers and 185 million drug users. An estimated figure of about 20-40 per cent among students has been quoted by various studies. Most strikingly abuse of drugs among physicians has been estimated to be about 30 to 100 times the rate in the general population.

Why are medical students prone to addictions ?

The most common reason reported in the studies for using such substances was relief from psychological stress (>70%) for academic performance as well as fierce competition.

Peer pressure and experimental use is also important as community acceptance is a common prerogative among the young.

Easy availability (42.6%) of various drugs is a significant determinant of substance abuse among medical students, urban background, family history of substance abuse, higher economic status, depression and low self-esteem have been associated with increased addictive tendencies among undergraduate students.

What are the different substances in common use ?

There is abundant use of alcohol, tobacco, tranquilizers and psychedelics among medical students.

Cannabis, opioids and stimulants, such as amphetamines are also prevalent among undergraduate students.

A large Canadian Study has revealed that the lifetime self-reported prevalence rates were 45.6% (95% CI, 44.0%-47.2%) for cannabis, 8.3% (95% CI, 7.4%-9.2%) for NPS, and 6.8% (95% CI, 5.9%-7.7%) for cigarettes while past-month excessive alcohol use was documented in 46.4%

These numbers reflect the magnitude of the problem and arouses concern about the implications for their personal health, training and clinical practice.

What are the Consequences of Substance Abuse?

There are far-reaching consequences on lifestyle patterns, mental health and productivity.

Academic performance is significantly affected, as depicted by a study, which found a negative correlation between substance abuse and academic achievement.

Inaccessibility, irritability, defensive behaviour, anxiety and mood swings are some of the manifestations. These ultimately lead to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and burnout.

Also the risk of future cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and psychiatric disorders are compounded.

Is there enough data ?

The magnitude of this situation is not well elucidated as there is an inhibition in coming out with the problem of dependence or impairment. A systematic and multi-institutional surveillance system is the need of the hour.

Existent literature reviewed reveals that substance abuse among undergraduate students in India is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors and significant consequences and serious health risks.

This issue presents a unique study of comparison between the students of a reputed non-medical college and medical students. Younger age, male gender and higher socioeconomic classes had a greater association with addictions. It was noted that substance abuse in relation to alcohol and tobacco was much more in non-medicos than their medico brothers but incidence of stimulant drug use and sedatives were similar. Awareness about the health consequences is projected as a determinant factor.

What is the way forward ?

Hand holding is the key to success.

Counseling services, both individual and group-based, are effective interventions to deal with this delicate situation. It is often difficult to bring out the proper history of impairment. Students should be encouraged to talk about their impediments and insecurities².

Educational campaigns and awareness programs focusing on the risks and consequences of substance abuse have shown promise. Collaboration between educational institutions, healthcare providers, and community organizations is vital in implementing comprehensive prevention programs. Also development of strategies for support of the affected students, which is woefully lacking in our set ups, is to be devised.

Further research is warranted to characterize the nationwide patterns of substance use among medical students, and to identify the predispositions so that protective factors may be reinforced effectively.

FURTHER READING

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- 4 Kumar R, Goel NK, Sharma MK — Impact of substance abuse on academic achievement among college students. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* 2021; **30(1)**: 76-82.