

Short communication

## Students' attitudes and practices towards drug and alcohol use at Tabriz University of Medical Sciences

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مواقف الطلاب وممارساتهم إزاء تعاطي المخدرات والكحول في جامعة تبريز للعلوم الطبية  
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**الخلاصة:** يدرس هذا المسح الاستبياني مواقف وممارسات الطلاب الذكور القاطنين في أحد مباني الإقامة التابعة لجامعة تبريز للعلوم الطبية في جمهورية إيران الإسلامية إزاء تعاطي المخدرات والكحول. وقد تبين أنه من بين 173 طالباً شملتهم الدراسة، سبق لثلثهم (32%) أن جرّب تعاطي الكحول أو المخدرات مرة واحدة على الأقل في حياتهم، أو خلال الأشهر الستة الأخيرة من حياتهم، وأن 16% منهم قد جرّب تعاطي الكحول، و6% منهم قد جرّب تعاطي الحشيش، و6% قد جرّب تعاطي الأفيون، و2% قد جرّب تعاطي الهيروين. فيما أبلغ 16 طالباً (9%) عن أنهم مدمنون على تعاطي الكحول، كما أن 16 طالباً (9%) منهم يتعاطون أدوية مخظورة أخرى. فيما أبلغ طالبان اثنان عن تعاطيهم المخدرات بالحقن. ويعتقد الكثير من الطلاب أن التدخين وتعاطي المخدرات والكحول في مبنى الإقامة قد أدّى لاضطراب فيه وجو غير مُستحب.

**ABSTRACT** This questionnaire survey examined attitudes and practices towards alcohol and drug use among male university students living in a dormitory at Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Islamic Republic of Iran. Of 173 students, about one third (32%) had tried alcohol or drugs at least once in the last 6 months: 16% had tried alcohol, 6% cannabis, 6% opium and 2% heroin. Sixteen students (9%) reported they were abusing alcohol and 16 (9%) other illicit drugs, with 2 using drugs by injection. Many students believed that smoking and drug and alcohol use in the dormitory created disruption and an unpleasant atmosphere.

### Attitudes et pratiques des étudiants face à la drogue et à l'alcool à l'Université des Sciences médicales de Tabriz

**RÉSUMÉ** Cette enquête par questionnaire a analysé les attitudes et pratiques face à la drogue et à l'alcool chez des étudiants de sexe masculin vivant en internat à l'Université des Sciences médicales de Tabriz (République islamique d'Iran). Sur 173 étudiants, environ un tiers (32 %) avait consommé de l'alcool ou de la drogue au moins une fois dans leur vie ou au cours des 6 derniers mois : 16 % avaient goûté à l'alcool, 6 % au cannabis, 6 % à l'opium et 2 % à l'héroïne. Seize étudiants (9 %) ont déclaré être devenus alcooliques tandis que seize autres (9 %) s'avaient toxicomanes, 2 d'entre eux utilisant des drogues injectables. Nombreux étaient les étudiants convaincus que le tabagisme et la consommation de drogue et d'alcool dans les locaux de l'internat étaient source de rupture et créaient une atmosphère désagréable.

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## Introduction

Drug and alcohol abuse among university students is a major cause for concern. Use of illegal substances may be associated with a deterioration in personal and social life, especially in the case of addictive drugs such as heroin when users often become involved in illegal activities to acquire money to purchase the drug [1]. Drug and alcohol use also disrupts other students who are not themselves users; one study in North America showed that 60.5% of college students had their study or sleep interrupted by others who drink alcohol, 53.6% had taken care of a drunken student, 29.3% had been insulted or humiliated, 18.6% had had a serious argument or quarrel, 13.6% had property damaged and 9.5% had been pushed, hit or assaulted [2]. According to Gilksman [3], although the number of times per week that students drink is not particularly high, the amount they drink at one time is a significant concern. Heavy or "binge" drinking for this age group could result in broken relationships, academic difficulties, accidents (related to driving and otherwise) and legal and administrative problems, which could affect the student's future.

Although much research has been conducted in North America and Europe [2-6] there has been little research on drug and alcohol use in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A survey in 2001 showed that 24% of Iranian university students had used narcotics at some time in their lives [7]. Another study reported that 22.3% of secondary-school students had abused drugs [8]. An exploratory study of Shiraz University students' attitudes towards drug use (cigarettes, alcohol, opium, heroin and cannabis) showed that about 52% had smoked cigarettes, 25% had tried alcohol, 21% opium and 12% cannabis, and 1 student had used heroin [9].

In the Islamic Republic of Iran young people who use alcohol or other illegal

substances may become involved in illegal activities and come to the attention of the legal authorities. The present survey was undertaken to encourage other universities and guidance centres in the country to obtain better information about drug and alcohol use for planning preventive programmes. The study examined attitudes and practices towards alcohol and illicit drug use among university students living in a dormitory at Tabriz University of Medical Sciences.

## Methods

This exploratory descriptive study in 2001 was carried out among students of Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Golestan, who were living in a single-sex male dormitory.

Questionnaires were distributed to students living in the dormitory. The questionnaire used a number of multiple-choice questions in order to reduce the answering time, to elicit more objective responses and to preserve confidentiality. The questionnaire asked for information on age, residency (how long they had lived in the dormitory) and what substances they had used in the 6 months prior to the survey (cigarettes, alcohol, opium, heroin or cannabis). The survey also asked about academic and social activities, the influence of drug users on other students and their opinion about addicts. Regardless of whether they used substances or not, the participants were asked about problems in the dormitory environment.

Students were given clear instructions about the goals of the research and how to complete the questionnaire. To encourage them to answer more openly, they did not write their name or any symbols showing their identity and they were assured about the responses being kept confidential.

The data were expressed as descriptive frequencies and percentages.

## Results

Out of 220 questionnaires distributed, 173 (79%) were returned completed. The mean age of participants was 21.3 years. Most students were 18–20 years old (30%) or 20–22 years old (30%), although there were older students aged 22–24 years (21%) and 24+ years (18%).

Students were asked their views about the dormitory environment. Many students were bothered by other students' behaviour in the dormitory: 27 (16%) were bothered by other students drinking alcohol, 6 (4%) by their using drugs and 33 (20%) by smoking. Some also complained about noise (67, 36%) and general dirtiness (45, 26%).

The results for tobacco, alcohol and drug use shows that 117 participants (68%) reported that they had not drunk alcohol or used illicit drugs in the last 6 months, whereas 56 students (32%) had tried alcohol or other drugs at least once in this period (Table 1). The most commonly used was alcohol (16% of students), followed by cannabis (6%), opium (6%) and heroin (2%). Sixteen students (9%) reported they were drinking large amounts of alcohol on each occasion and 16 (9%) were abusing

other illicit drugs, with 2 abusing drugs by injection. Of the students who were using substances, 42% became familiar with substance use before entering the university and 58% after entering. Some of the students (32, 19%) reported daily cigarette smoking but most (141, 82%) were non-smokers (i.e. not daily smokers).

When students were asked their opinions about drug users, 44 (25%) believed that they were sick (i.e. had a physical problem), 97 (56%) that they had mental problems (i.e. a psychological disorder such as depression, anxiety, antisocial behaviour), 18 (10%) that they were guilty (i.e. should be punished by the government) and 11 (6%) that they were guiltless (i.e. society should solve their problems).

## Discussion

The results of this analysis of students' use of cigarettes, alcohol and other psychoactive drugs shows wide variations in comparison with other surveys. Our research relied on self-reported answers about socially unacceptable and illegal behaviours, so the validity and reliability can be questioned. However, efforts were made to assure students about confidentiality, and multiple choice questions were used in order to obtain valid responses. We also cannot generalize the findings of this research for all students, as the students were a group living in a dormitory and were not randomly selected from all students in the university.

In our study nearly one third of respondents (32%) had tried addictive substances (cigarettes, opium, cannabis, heroin) in the previous 6 months. On the other hand, a study previously conducted in the Islamic Republic of Iran reported that 24% of students had used at least 1 illicit drug at least once in their life and 75% had never used drugs [7].

Table 1 Students' reported drug use in 6 months prior to survey

Substance	No. (n = 173)	%
Alcohol	27	16
Cannabis	11	6
Opium	11	6
Heroin	4	2
Injecting drugs	3	2
None	117	68

Alcohol may cause more problems on college campuses in Northern America and Europe than other substances. Our research revealed that 16% of male students living on campus in Tabriz had used alcohol in the previous 6 months and 9% said they were abusing alcohol. Ghanizadeh reported from Shiraz University in the Islamic Republic of Iran that 25% of 213 students had tried alcohol at least once in their life [9]. A study by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Canada showed that out of 7800 undergraduate students in 16 universities across Canada, 62.8% reported 5 or more drinks on a single occasion at least once since the beginning of the college year [3]. Students in university residences were most likely to report having 5 or more and 8 or more drinks per occasion at least once since September. Studies show that about 43% of all students report drinking in a high-risk manner at some point in their college career [6]. Surveys at colleges and universities across the United States of America indicate the percentage of students who used various other drugs within the previous year: marijuana (32.3%), amphetamines (6.5%) and hallucinogens (7.5%) [2].

In our research only 6% of students had used cannabis in the previous 6 months. Ghanizadeh reported that 12% of Shiraz students had tried cannabis and 5% had used cannabis in the 6 months before the survey [9]. The Canadian study showed that 47.0% of students reported using cannabis at some point in their lives and 28.7% had used cannabis during the previous 12 months [3].

Our study also showed 6% of students used opium in the last 6 months. These figures are lower than from Shiraz in 2001 where 21% of students had used opium ever and 10% in the last 6 months [9]. However, slightly more of our students in Tabriz (2%)

had used heroin in the last 6 months compared with only 1 student in Shiraz who had ever tried heroin and none who had used it recently [7]. Also, in accordance with the previous study, of those who had used drugs before, 29% had used opium, 10% heroin and 54% hashish [7]. On the other hand, according to a study of student drug use by Singh et al. in Punjab, India, 7 out of 10 undergraduate students had used drugs in the past [10]. This is higher than the current study and other studies in the Islamic Republic of Iran [7,9]. A total of 2.3% of Canadian students reported using at least 1 of 5 illicit drugs by injection during their lifetime (2600 students from 7800 participants) compared with just 1% of students ( $n = 2$ ) in our study who reported abusing injecting drugs [3].

In the Canadian study, 12.1% of students reported daily cigarette smoking and 10.4% reported occasional smoking [3], compared with our study where 19% of male students reported daily cigarette smoking. In our study 50% of participants said they were smokers. Ghanizadeh reported from Shiraz that 52% had ever smoked cigarettes, 27% in the previous 6 months [9].

As far as we know, there are few reports of university students' patterns of illicit drug use in the Islamic Republic of Iran, so more research is needed to understand patterns of student drug use inside our country. Recent research confirms that college campuses continue to have alcohol and other drug use problems. Students in Canada living on-campus or off-campus without their family reported higher rates of cannabis use during the previous 12 months (35.8% and 31.2% versus 24.7%) than students living with their family [3].

Our results suggest that efforts are needed to create a more positive campus culture regarding alcohol and illicit drug use in

the Islamic Republic of Iran. This could be achieved by emphasizing the importance of academic study, creating a more stress-free environment for students, facilitating a wider range of social and recreational activities, setting up alcohol and drug awareness and counselling programmes, and notifying parents when students engage in serious or

repeated violations of alcohol laws or other drug policies.

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