

Substance misuse in secondary students in Hong Kong

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This study surveys the extent of substance misuse behaviour among secondary students in Hong Kong. One-fifth of the sample were misusing substances themselves and one-quarter had friends misusing substances. On seeking help regarding substance misuse, two-thirds would see the school social worker; the second preferred helper was a friend.

There is a worldwide concern about substance misuse in the adolescent population. The use of cocaine and narcotics has an adverse impact on development of personality, attainment of social skills, and integration of the adolescent into the community (Miller & Philips, 1992). Despite education about drugs, many adolescents have limited awareness of the damages. Social pressures, like peer group influence, remain the primary perceived reason for taking drugs (Wright & Pearl, 1995).

During 1994, there were 4172 young drug misusers aged under 21 reported to the Hong Kong Government's Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) which registered narcotic and non-narcotic drug misusers. There was an increase of 22% in the number of newly reported misusers and the trend of polysubstance misuse was also alarming. In 1994, 10.2% of all known drug misusers were reported to have misused more than one type during the year. A higher proportion (19.6%) was recorded for those under 21. The common types of drugs taken by multi-drug misusers of all ages were heroin, cannabis and triazolam. Multi-drug misusers aged under 21 most commonly took heroin, cannabis and cough medicines (Hong Kong Action Committee Against Narcotics, 1995).

The study

Through the supervisor of the school social workers, five secondary schools from the Eastern District of Hong Kong Island were selected. One hundred anonymous questionnaires were distributed by the school social workers to the students during October 1995. The students had no prior knowledge of the survey and the staff of the schools did not take part directly.

The questionnaire was anonymous. It was designed to collect information about gender, age and education level, and contact with misused substance as follows:

- whether they have friends taking misused substances
- whether they are taking misused substances themselves. What types of drug they are taking, namely minor tranquillisers, cough medicines, organic solvents, stimulants such as amphetamines, hallucinogens and others
- their preferred helper on seeking advice, which included school social worker, outreach social worker, school teacher, parent, medical staff, law enforcer, friends and others.

Findings

Of 100 questionnaires sent out, 81 completed questionnaires were returned, by 39 (48%) boys and 42 (52%) girls. The age of the students ranged from 11–20 years (mean age 14.5 years).

Twenty-five per cent of students had a friend taking substances of misuse. Sixty-five (80%) students were non-misusers and 15 (19%) were misusers. One had not answered the question. Among the 15 misusers, only one (7%) admitted taking one drug only, 10 (66%) took multiple drugs and four (27%) did not answer. Table 1 shows the prevalence of misused substances. The most commonly misused drugs were minor tranquillisers and cough medicines.

Concerning their preferred helper (Table 2), the student can choose more than one. The preferred choice was school social worker (59.2%), second a friend (48.1%) and third a school teacher (38.3%).

Comment

In Hong Kong, there has been limited study of the prevalence of substance misuse in defined populations. This study is based on students contacted by the school social workers and might include more disturbed students. The sample

Table 1. Prevalence of misused substances (number of misusers: 15)

Misused substance	n (%)
Minor tranquilliser	9 (60)
Cough medicines	9 (60)
Hallucinogen	7 (46.7)
Stimulants	2 (13.3)
Organic solvent	1 (6.6)
Others	2 (13.3)

Table 2. Helper preferred if seeking advice (number of students: 81)

Helper	n (%)
School social worker	48 (59.2)
Friend	39 (48.1)
School teacher	31 (38.3)
Parent	26 (32.1)
Outreach social worker	15 (18.5)
Medical staff	11 (13.6)
Others	9 (11.1)
Law enforcer	6 (7.4)

size was small. The extent to which the findings can be generalised to the other secondary students is not clear.

Knowing the key role of social influence on initial experimenting with misused substances, that one-quarter of students have friends misusing drugs is alarming. The most misused substances were minor tranquillisers and coughs medicines. It reflects easy accessibility, unlawfully bought from some dispenser shops or prescribed by an inconsiderate general practitioner. Although only 3% of students misused organic solvents, the recent increasing trend of misuse among students, as reflected in newspaper reports, and the serious physical complications of asphyxia and sudden death, are of concern. Narcotics misuse was not common in our group and might reflect past publicity about the 'hard drugs'. Two-thirds of the misusers took more than one substance of misuse - much higher than the government's figure. It is unusually difficult to treat those with complex patterns of substance misuse as they may be under the influence of opposing pharmacological

effects in addition to having other psychiatric problems.

The most preferred helper was the school social teacher. This finding might just reflect our sampling defect. In Hong Kong, there is a designated social worker for each school providing counselling for students in need and referred by the teacher or self-referred. However, that thirty-nine students preferred friends compared with only 26 who preferred parents might demonstrate a westernised trend. In Hong Kong, family coherence and parental authority once played a prominent role in adolescent development.

We should be alert to the possibility of substance misuse by all adolescents. Some subgroups are at higher risk than others. The strongest predictor of adolescent substance misuse is association with friends who misuse substance regularly. One must also be aware that substance misuse is starting at increasingly younger ages (Schonberg, 1988).

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