

ABSTRACT

Durst, J. S. (2009). Level of substance use and related problems in medical professional students

Medical professionals are at higher risk for substance abuse than those in other professions. In fact, the percentage of the cases investigated by state physician impairment boards in the U.S. due to substance abuse has ranged from 80% to 96% (Baldwin, Hughes, Conrad, Storr, & Sheehan, 1991). These patterns of abuse may take root while individuals are in medical school. Several studies in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK) have provided evidence for high levels of substance use and abuse in medical school populations (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1991; Clark, Eckenfels, Daugherty, and Fawcett, 1987; Mangus, Hawkins, and Miller, 1998; Webb, Ashton, Kelly, and Kamali, 1998). For example, a longitudinal study of one class of medical students in the U.S. found that 11% of students met the criteria for excessive drinking during at least one six-month period and 18% met criteria for alcohol abuse (Clark et al., 1987). In a survey of 1996 U.S. medical school graduates, 18% of respondents reported drinking three or more days per week and 21% indicated at least one episode of binge drinking (i.e., 5 or more drinks at one sitting) in the past 30 days (Mangus et al., 1998). In the UK, a study of students across seven medical schools revealed that 12% of the male and 7% of the female respondents reported high-risk levels of alcohol consumption, and 10% of participants indicated weekly or greater frequency of cannabis use (Webb et al., 1998).

Due to research findings such as these and the risk to the public that can stem from the impairment of medical students and physicians due to substance use, it is in the best interest of medical schools to be aware of the extent of substance use and abuse among its students. This awareness can help schools to design appropriate preventative and educational measures to limit the negative effects that this use and abuse may have on student mental health and academic progress, as well as current and later professionalism. It is during medical school that issues of professionalism are first discussed and ethical guidelines regarding appropriate conduct as a student and practitioner of medicine are established.

To this end, a pilot study of the substance use patterns of students enrolled at St. George's University (SGU) was undertaken by the staff of the University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), which provides mental health care to students, staff, and faculty. This pilot study serves as a preliminary step to a larger study of the entire School of Medicine, as well as other schools (i.e., Veterinary Medicine, Arts and Sciences) at SGU. The pilot study, focused primarily on pre-medicine students, was conducted in the spring of 2007 in order to investigate the best measures and procedures for use in the larger follow-up study of the medical school population. The following is a description of the findings of this preliminary pilot study.