Drinking patterns among health professionals and impact on attitudes toward addressing alcohol use

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ABSTRACT

Background: Recent research finds rates of at-risk drinking among medical residents and advanced practice registered nursing (APRN) students comparable to the rates of their age-group peers. While work by Richman in the early 1990s examined problem drinking among medical students, there has been little written on this issue over the past 2 decades. This study examines self-reported drinking patterns of health professionals in training (medical residents, APRN students, physician assistant (PA) students, 1st year medical students, and psychology graduate students) prior to receiving training in alcohol and drug screening and brief intervention (SBI). Differences in drinking patterns across different programs are identified as well as the relationship between participant drinking patterns and attitudes toward addressing patients’ alcohol use.

Methods: Prior to a scheduled training workshop health professional students at a southeastern university, participating in an SBI training program, were asked to complete a confidential survey. The survey included items about personal alcohol consumption, attitudes and beliefs about addressing alcohol and/or drug misuse, and current SBI practices.

Results: When compared to age-group peers, health professional students reported comparable rates of binge drinking. Across the different programs, Psych MA and PA students reported the highest rates of binge drinking (34.6% and 32.6%, respectively), while medical residents had the lowest rate (8.6%). Student drinking patterns have a limited impact on student attitudes toward addressing alcohol misuse and current SBI practices.

Conclusion: The high rate of binge drinking among some health professional students is concerning, but overall the rates were consistent with previous work. Rates were the highest among psychology graduate and PA students. Much of the difference may be related to age as these students were, on average, 3 to 9 years younger than residents and APRN students. Drinking patterns seem to have a limited impact on student attitudes toward identifying and addressing patient alcohol use.

METHODS

Study Sample: Data are derived from a cross-sectional survey (N=345) completed by 187 first year medical students, 32 APRN students, 48 medical residents, 49 physician assistant students, and 26 psychology masters students.

Measures: Prior to receiving SBI training, participants completed surveys containing questions to assess personal alcohol consumption, attitudes toward addressing alcohol and/or drug misuse, and current SBI practices. Total of 22 attitudes and practices questions were administered.

Outcome: Analysis of variance was used to assess group differences in alcohol use as well as the relationship between alcohol use patterns, attitudes toward addressing use and current SBI practices.

RESULTS

Sample Demographics by Program

- The majority of participants were female (63.8%), non-Hispanic (93.0%), and white (61.8%). The mean age was 26 years.
- Characteristics varied by program in terms of gender, race, and age.

Participant Alcohol Consumption Patterns

- Frequency of alcohol use did not differ significantly by participant program.
- Most reported that they drank an alcoholic beverage at least 1-2 times/month (37.2%) or 1-3 times/month (35.3%) during the last 12 months.
- Overall, 53.6% of participants reported binge drinking in the past year.
  - 29.0% reported binge drinking on average less than once a month.
  - 24.6% reported binge drinking on average at least once a month.

Prevalence of binge drinking by program (1+ times/month)

- BRFSS
- NSDUH

SBI Attitudes and Practices

- Attitudes towards addressing alcohol misuse and SBI practices were generally positive.
- Drinking patterns had a limited relationship with attitudes and beliefs about addressing alcohol use.
  - Only three items (out of 22) were significantly different by drinking pattern.

CONCLUSIONS

- Overall, health professional students report comparable rates of binge drinking in relation to their age group peers.
- Though binge drinking rates are highest among medical, PA, and Psych MA students, the difference may be explained by age as these students are, on average, 3 to 9 years younger than residents and APRN students.
- Attitudes toward addressing alcohol use in patients was not significantly impacted by personal drinking behavior.
- Future post-training and post-graduation surveys will determine if observed differences persist or if they are negated with SBI training.