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The Health, Concerns of Students and the Implication for Alcohol Education Programming*

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Introduction

University aged youth have a variety of health and social problems which are directly or indirectly related to alcohol consumption. The leading cause of death among this age group is accidents. Motor vehicle, drowning, firearm accidents and burns have consistently been shown by research to be alcohol-related. Reports have indicated that between 45 and 60% of all motor-vehicle accidents, up to 68% of drownings and over 50% of burn victims had been drinking prior to the accident. Suicide and homicide are the second and third leading causes of death among youth. It is estimated that up to 80% of all suicide victims and many homicide offenders and their victims had been drinking before the event. Alcohol abuse, itself, is highest among youth and causes various problems such as arrests for driving while intoxicated, transitory physical problems such as nausea and vomiting and poor interpersonal relationships. Alcohol use is also associated with recreational drug use and smoking of cigarettes. Irresponsible alcohol consumption and abuse can also lead to sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies as youth may not exhibit responsible sexual behaviors under the influence of alcohol. (4, 3, 1)

For planning alcohol and drug education curriculum, students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors concerning substance use and abuse is usually considered important. There have been many studies which have examined the behaviors, attitudes and knowledge of students concerning alcohol, but few have focused upon attitudes or concerns about health and safety problems which are related to alcohol consumption and which cause high mortality or morbidity among students in this age group. Information concerning students' perceived concerns about health topics, especially those which relate to alcohol consumption, could be useful for designing substance abuse educational programs in the school and community.

Thus the purpose of this study was to determine the degree of concern students have about a variety of health problems and issues which affect their physical, mental and social well-being. The purpose of this study was also to compare the ranking of health items which are related to alcohol consumption with the leading mortality and morbidity problems of college age students which are related to drinking.

Methodology

The Health Concern Questionnaire (1) developed by the author in 1970 and utilized by others (2) was used for this study. The questionnaire was administered to all students enrolled in personal health courses at Indiana University during spring semester 1982. A total of 429 students volunteered to complete the questionnaire.

Three items on the original questionnaire were changed to update the terminology. "Vietnam Combat" was changed to "Combat." "Atomic Warfare", to "Nuclear Warfare" and "Venereal Diseases" to "Sexually Transmitted Diseases." Students were asked to check how concerned they were about each of the 50 items in terms of how they could affect their physical, mental or social well-being. They indicated their degree of concern for each item by using the number "5" for Extremely Concerned, "4" for Very Concerned, "3" for Moderately Concerned, "2" for Mildly Concerned, and "1" for Not Concerned. The resulting data were computer tabulated to obtain a mean score for each of the items. The items were then ranked from the highest to the lowest by their mean score. In case of ties the item with the greatest variance was ranked first. For purposes of interpreting the results of the calculations. "Extremely Concerned" = 5.00-4.55, "Very Concerned" = 4.55-3.56. etc.

Results and Conclusions

Table I indicates the rankings of the health concern items. Students were only Very Concerned about one item. Items which related to alcohol use and abuse to which they expressed Moderate Concern included Automobile Accidents, Death, Alcohol Dependence, Drug Abuse, Smoking, Being Burned, and sexual related concerns such as Birth Control, use of Contraceptives, Pregnancy and Sex Behavior. They were, however, only Mildly Concerned about Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Drowning and Firearm Accidents and Suicides.

It was encouraging to find that Auto Accidents was the third highest health concern of these students since this is one of the leading causes of death for individuals in this age group and it is a problem that they need to be aware of particularly if they consume alcohol. However, Suicides, which is the number two cause of death among college youth was ranked a low 35 out of 50 and students were only mildly concerned about it. The apparent lack of concern about suicides and drowning may be due to the fact that this youthful problem may not be openly discussed in the home or the school and students may not be aware that it is a problem in their age group.

The students ranked drowning, a high accident item among college youth as 31 of 50 and only indicated mild concern about this problem. Two other accident related items such as being Burned ranked 21st and Firearm Accidents ranked 32nd. Perhaps students are not aware that other accident type situations, and in particular drowning, are common in youth.

There was moderate concern about all of the sexually related items with the exception of sexually transmitted diseases to which they only had Mild Concern. It was ranked 26 out of 50. It was surprising to find that students did not have more concern about this item as the mass media often discusses sexually transmitted disease as a morbidity problem among youth.

Since these health problems are the major causes of mortality and morbidity in the college age group some measures need to be taken as they are all associated with irresponsible alcohol consumption or problem drinking. More emphasis on these health problems, especially suicides and drownings, and their relationship to alcohol consumption needs to be emphasized in alcohol education programming in the public schools and colleges. Community education programs need to discuss these problems as part of their alcohol education campaigns and mass media efforts need to emphasize the association of these health problems with alcohol.

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