

Identifying hidden psychotropic substance abusers among patients attending the Accident & Emergency departments in Hong Kong

Executive summary

Patients with medical complications associated with substance abuse are not uncommon in the Accident & Emergency Departments (AED). They are usually not difficult to identify and management protocols are often available. But the prevalence of substance abusers who do not present with medical problems overtly related to substance abuse is unknown. Their early identification may allow early intervention.

This study aimed at estimating the prevalence of hidden substance abusers among the AED patient population and evaluating their characteristics. In this study, AED patients with non-drug related presentations in three AED were screened for substance use by a two staged screening procedure. Stage one screening was by asking a single question of 'How many times in the past year have you used illicit drug or used prescription medication for non-medical reasons?' The second stage was by the administration of the Drug Abuse Screening Test – 10 (DAST-10) questionnaire.

During the study period, 8248 AED patients were screened by the stage one question. 76 of them (0.9%) were screened positive. Among the 3 study sites, Tuen Mun had the highest percentage of positive cases. Many of them were male and aged from 18 to 39. 35 out of these 76 subjects were screened by DAST-10 questionnaire. 91.4% had a score of 3 or above, indicating at least a moderately severe problem of drug abuse. Injuries were the most common reason of AED presentation. Co-existing psychiatric illness was not common. Their age distribution, gender distribution, employment status, educational attainment, marital status, types of quarters, conviction history and the popular drug of abuse were similar to the drug users reported to the Central Registry of Drug abusers.

On the basis of the findings, hidden substance abuse is probably not prevalent among the local AED patients. Targeted screening of male patients aged between 18 and 39 in selected AED may be more feasible than universal screening. The characteristics of hidden substance abusers identified in this study are largely similar to the drug users reported to the Central Registry of Drug abusers.