

Drug abuse and misuse: Core knowledge, attitudes and opinions of pharmacy students and community pharmacists in Republic of North Macedonia

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Introduction

Drug misuse and abuse cause serious health consequences as well as social problems, disrupted family and community cohesion, lost productivity, security risks and slow economic development.

The recent evidence shows that complex problem of drug misuse and abuse is growing in the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the survey on the use of psychoactive substances in the general population conducted in 2017, 8.9% of adults reported usage of illegal drugs. The most commonly used drug was cannabis (EMCDDA, 2017). The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) survey from 2019 showed that 7.3% of students aged 15-16 have used drugs during their lifetime (EMCDDA, 2019).

Although the number of people with substance use disorders has increased, the availability of treatment interventions has remained low. Pharmacists have unique knowledge about mechanisms of action and adverse effects caused by inappropriate use of drugs. As health providers, they should be actively involved in reducing the negative effects that substance use disorders have on society and health system. They can approach a wide spectrum of patients in need of support and motivation for better and optimal outcomes in treatment. With their comprehensive knowledge, pharmacists should participate in public education and prevention programs about substance abuse and misuse, and stressing the adverse health consequences of the misuse of legal drugs and the use of illegal drugs. Community pharmacists must provide holistic pharmaceutical care to keep patients' trust in order to help them relieve pain and anxiety and to prevent them from

engaging in further conduct that leads to an inability to control the use of legal or illegal drugs.

Taking into consideration the pivotal role of community pharmacists in combating drug abuse and misuse, baseline knowledge of drug abuse and misuse is crucial in order to recognize patients with substance use disorders and assist them in their recovery process.

The objective of this study was to assess the knowledge and experiences of final-years undergraduate pharmacy students and community pharmacists with up to 5 years working experience, as well as their perceptions toward drug misuse and abuse in Macedonian society and how it could be prevented, controlled, and treated.

Materials and methods

We used a cross-sectional anonymous survey using a self-completed, previously validated and published questionnaire (Jaber et al., 2015) that was shared to a cohort of fourth and final year pharmacy students and community pharmacists with up to 5 years working experience. The survey was divided into three sections. The first two sections were related to respondents' demographics, educational level, and any experience they might have had with drug misuse or abuse. The respondents' attitudes, knowledge and skills in providing pharmaceutical care to patients with substance use disorders were assessed in Section 3 of the survey, which was applicable only to community pharmacists.

Results and discussion

A total of 92 responses were obtained, of which 53 were from pharmacy students and 39 were from community pharmacist. Most of the participants were females (64.1%) and undergraduates 57.6%.

A majority of respondents (90.0%) agreed that pharmacists can reduce mortality associated with abuse and misuse of controlled substances. Additionally, 97.5% of participants agree that pharmacist should advise the patient who abuse or misuse drugs about the possible risks and side effects or the way of treating the risks of their behavior. Students were asked if they had any friends or relatives with an addiction-related disorder, and the results revealed that around one-third of students (32.5%) know someone who abuses or misuses controlled substances.

Most of the students (62.5%) believe that is unethical to sell misusers controlled drugs and 22.5% of them were unsure of that statement. 72.5% of respondents agree that pharmacist should not sell drugs to people who appear to abuse those drugs.

Nearly 77.5% of respondents think that dispensing controlled drugs without a medical recipe is an important source of money for the pharmacy. The attitude of 53.8% of pharmacy students is that certain OTC drugs should be reclassified to prescription-only status.

Most of the pharmacy students (65.0 %) state that during their study, they have received training about drug misuse at the Faculty of Pharmacy in Skopje, while 35% of students disagree with that statement. Almost every respondent (97.4%) agreed that further training on recognizing drug abusers/misusers is necessary and they are willing to gain more information of the types of drugs that are abused in the local area.

Results indicated that 89.6% of community pharmacists are prepared to inform or warn patients about the potential drugs adverse reactions. When asked how they can detect someone who abused or misused drugs, 32.2% of them responded that patients report lost or stolen supply of the prescribed drug, 35.4% of them declared that patients claimed that the controlled substance is the only effective one and 35.4% of participants stated that patients with abusive disorder have strong and persistent request for the controlled drug. Around 97% of community pharmacists additionally inform or warn patients about the possibility of adverse drug reaction. It is important to note that 34.3% of community pharmacists with up to 5 years work experience reported that they have the same health care approach to abusive patients as other patients.

According to our findings, there is a need for additional knowledge about drug misuse and abuse among pharmacy students and community pharmacists, which is similar to the findings of a previous study performed in Jordan (Jaber et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Pharmacists play an important role in the prevention, management and treatment of substance abuse problems. Overall, this survey shows that more educational content areas and guidance on substance use disorder curricula are needed for Faculty of Pharmacy to better prepare students and future pharmacists to provide evidence-based and sensitive pharmaceutical care to patients with substance use disorders.

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