



Binge drinking and health behavior in medical students

Stefan Keller ^{a,b,*}, Jason E. Maddock ^b, Robert G. Laforge ^c,
Wayne F. Velicer ^c, Heinz-Dieter Basler ^b

^a *Department of Public Health Sciences and Epidemiology, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA*

^b *Institute for Medical Psychology, Philipps University Marburg, Germany*

^c *Cancer Prevention Research Center, University of Rhode Island, USA*

Abstract

Objectives: The objective of this study was to assess the prevalence of binge drinking and its relation to other health behaviors, drinking-related attitudes and perceived social norms among German medical students.

Methods: 271 first-year German medical students completed a cross-sectional, self-administered survey. A total of 252 (62% female and 38% male) students provided useable surveys. The mean age was 20.6 years (S.D. = 1.7).

Results: Most students reported heavy drinking with 24% having one episode in the past 2 weeks (*Infrequent Bingers*) and 28% having two or more episodes (*Frequent Bingers*). Men were more likely than women to have had a binge drinking episode. Frequent binge drinkers saw more pros of drinking and reported a higher temptation to drink than students in the other groups. Additionally, they were more likely to smoke, use cannabis, not exercise and not eat fruits and vegetables. All students overestimated their peers' alcohol intake and binge drinking frequency.

Conclusions: Binge drinking was highly prevalent in this sample and clearly related to other health risk behaviors. Drinking rates were similar to college students in other Western countries. Future research needs to assess the consequences of this multiple risk behavior among medical students regarding academic and professional performance as well as personal health.

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* Corresponding author. Department of Public Health Sciences and Epidemiology, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1960 East-West Rd., Honolulu, HI 96822, USA. Tel.: +1 808 956 4553; fax: +1 808 956 5818.

E-mail address: kellers@hawaii.edu (S. Keller).

1. Introduction

Excessive alcohol consumption and binge drinking behavior in adolescents and young adults has been recognized as an important risk behavior, increasing the likelihood of health problems, drunk driving, aggressive behavior, unsafe sexual activity, accidents etc. (Maddock, Laforge, Rossi, & O'Hare, 2001; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994; Wechsler et al., 2002; Wood, Sher, & McGowan, 2000). Heavy drinking during adolescence and young adulthood predicts future alcohol-related problems and academic failure in certain groups (Jennison, 2004).

Heavy drinking is highly prevalent amongst college and university students (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Hingson & Howland, 2002; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002), including medical students (Delnevo, Abatemarco, & Gotsch, 1996; Granville-Chapman, Yu, & White, 2003; Pickard, Bates, Dorian, Greig, & Saint, 2000). For a number of medical students, alcohol consumption seems to function as a way to cope with the stress of medical education (Kjobli et al., 2004; Tyssen, Vaglum, Aasland, Gronvold, & Ekeberg, 1996). The known interaction between binge drinking and behaviors like cannabis use and cigarette smoking in adolescence (Johnson, Boles, Vaughan, & Kleber, 2000) continues into adulthood and is also prevalent in medical students (Newbury-Birch, Walshaw, & Kamali, 2001). Even though there are surprisingly few empirical studies on this issue, data indicate that alcohol consumption increases from medical school into the early professional career (Newbury-Birch et al., 2001) and that there may be a trend toward an increase in alcohol consumption in physicians (Harrison & Chick, 1994). Even if recent studies indicate that overall alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems may still be lower in practising physicians than in the general population and in other health professions, there is a subgroup who will suffer from minor and major alcohol-related dysfunctions (Kenna & Wood, 2004).

Among the constructs that contribute to binge drinking behavior are the individuals' perceived social norms as well as drinking-related attitudes. Researchers have proposed that misperceptions about the social norms regarding heavy drinking may contribute to the development or maintenance of problematic drinking behavior, and intervention programs for college students have been designed to reduce these normative misperceptions (Neighbors, Larimer, & Lewis, 2004). Many studies have found that college students overestimate the level of heavy drinking by peers (Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1991; Kypril & Langley, 2003; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996), but no studies have documented this phenomenon among medical students.

Several cognitive constructs have been identified as corresponding with or predicting binge drinking behavior, among them the perceived pros and cons of drinking (e.g. Migneault, Velicer, Prochaska, & Stevenson, 1999; Noar, Laforge, Maddock, & Wood, 2003) and the perceived temptation to drink across different situations (Maddock et al., 2000). These latter constructs are an integral part of the Transtheoretical Model of Change which describes mechanisms of behavior change and serves as a theoretical basis for successful interventions targeting various health risk behaviors, including drinking behavior (Laforge et al., 2006; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983; Prochaska et al., 2004; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997; Velasquez, von Sternberg, Dodrill, Kan, & Parsons, 2005).

While numerous international studies have reported data on drinking behavior in college and university students, hardly any data exist regarding drinking behavior and determining conditions for this behavior in German student populations. Two smaller German studies reported higher alcohol consumption in German students compared to American students, and binge rates (defined as five or more drinks on one occasion in the previous month) of approx. 47% (Cox et al., 2001; Hanewinkel & Wiborg, 2005). No data have been published that specifically refer to German medical students. Medical students are a special

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