Prescription Drug Misuse in Medical Students: Reflecting on a Time for Change

Sir,

Back in 2006, while conducting research on hospitalised drug addicts of the Psychiatry Ward, Lady Reading Hospital, Peshawar, our team (comprised of two psychologists, three psychiatrists and one pharmacist) regularly assessed the patients according to DSM-IV (Substance-Use Disorders Diagnostic-Schedule) and ICD-9 criteria with a retrospective assessment through the Wender Utah rating scale (WURS) to rule out comorbid attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). During the study, a significant population was found addicted to prescription drugs, especially the students. Given that students are the future of a nation, requiring more attention than any other group, an increase in the prevalence of prescription drugs misuse (PDM) amongst them compelled us to write this report.

During this study (2006 - 2015), we examined 6,348 substance use disorder (SUD) patients; among them (excluding the count of the patients who relapsed/readmitted for drug detoxification), 845 (30%) medical students, 50 (1.7%) pharmacy students and 400 (14.2%) other students were prescription drug addicts of the class of benzodiazepines, and central nervous system (CNS) stimulants. Then, we retrieved the previous 20 years (1985 - 2005) record and it was shocking that the rate of PDM was increasing from 134 prescription drug addicts from 1985 - 1995 to a massive increase of 876 in the year 1995 - 2005, among the patients admitted for drug detoxification. In our study, the students who acquired these drugs were mostly from the medical field. The most commonly used PDMs were generally benzodiazepines (alprazolam, bromazepam) and CNS stimulants (methylphenidate). These drugs ameliorate the ability to cope with stress and they also improve attention skills. Both drug classes have the potential for addiction and have become a global burden. The immediate concern is that these prescription drugs can easily be obtained in many countries, without any prescription. Misuse of the drugs, followed by their addiction is increasing steadily in youth, a matter of serious concern that needs to be properly addressed.

Most of the government agencies focus on the control of narcotics, backed by proper legislation (Control of Narcotic Substances Act, 1997). The challenging issue, misuse and addiction of prescription drugs, has been neglected so far in many countries.

We, therefore, suggest that legislation/rules should be revised and implemented for the control of PDM with addiction potential; proper mass awareness programmes about misuse of prescription drugs should be initiated, especially for youth and students; and prescription monitoring programmes should be developed by the government agencies to avoid re-filling of these prescriptions.

REFERENCES


4. Lakhan SE, Kirchgessner A. Prescription stimulants in individuals with and without attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Misuse, cognitive impact, and adverse effects. Brain Behav 2012; 2,661-77.
