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Recommended Citation

Scarpa, Aaron; Michael Castle; Ian Fletcher; and Elizabeth Lawrence. "An Assessment of Alcohol Use Patterns amongst Medical Students at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine." (2019).

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An Assessment of Alcohol Use Patterns Amongst Medical Students

at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine

Scarpa AC, Castle MS, Fletcher IE, Shane NL, Lawrence EC



Background

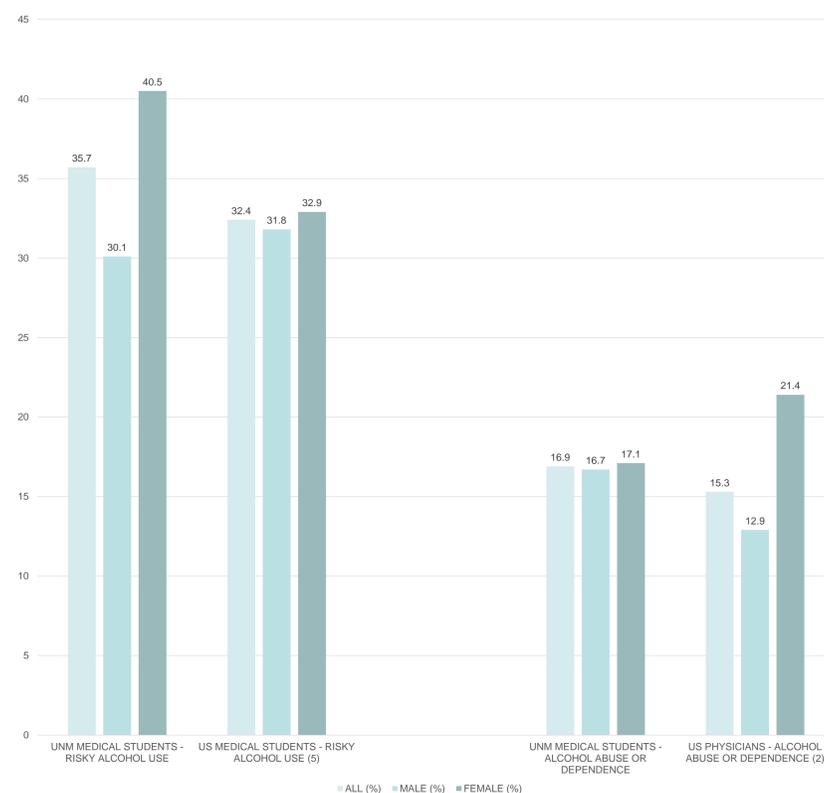
- The alcohol consumption patterns of physicians impacts the health of their patients. How much a physician drinks influences how they counsel patients about alcohol use and how they define safe and acceptable patterns of use¹. In addition, physicians with alcohol use disorder are at greater risk for making medical errors^{2,3}.
- 15.3% of American physicians meet criteria for alcohol dependence or abuse. Female physicians are more likely than their male counterparts to meet this diagnostic criteria (21.4% of female physicians vs. 12.9% of male physicians)².
- U.S. medical students are known to engage in excessive use of alcohol. One study concluded the prevalence of binge drinking in sampled medical students was 58%, and other studies have demonstrated a prevalence of excessive drinking in approximately 34% in medical students^{1,4,5}.
- We surveyed University of New Mexico School of Medicine (UNM SOM) students in order to understand their patterns of alcohol consumption and how these patterns compare with students at other medical schools and with other physicians.

Methods

- All UNM SOM students take an electronic, confidential wellness survey at matriculation, the end of their first year, and the end of their third year of medical school.
- This survey uses the validated AUDIT-C screening tool and standard scoring on a scale of 1 -12 to assess alcohol use patterns. The higher the AUDIT-C score, the more problematic the alcohol consumption pattern is. An AUDIT-C score ≥ 3 in women and a score ≥ 4 in men to be “risky”, “excessive” or “problematic” drinking, a condition that indicates increased risk for alcohol abuse or dependence in the future. We used an AUDIT-C score of ≥ 4 in women and ≥ 5 in men to indicate alcohol dependence or abuse, a condition referred to in the DSM V as alcohol use disorder (AUD)⁶.
- We analyzed surveys from 473 unique medical students from five classes (2018-2022), using data collected at the end of year 3 for students in CO2018 and CO2019 (n=172), data collected at the end of year 1 for students in CO2020 and CO2021 (n=165), and data collected at matriculation for students in CO2022 and those students in CO2021 for which end of year 1 data was not available (n=136).

Results

- 529 unique medical students from the UNM SOM Classes of 2018-2022 were invited to complete the survey. The response rate was 89%, with 473 students responding.
- Of the students surveyed, 16.7% of men and 17.1% of women met criteria for AUD (AUDIT-C scores of ≥ 4 for women and 5 for men). 16.9% of all respondents met AUD criteria.
- A total of 35.7% of UNM SOM students sampled met criteria for at-risk drinking using AUDIT-C. There was significant variation in this group by gender: 30.1% of men met criteria for at-risk drinking, compared to 40.5% of women students (p =.001).
- No correlation was seen between risky drinking and age, level of engagement in self-care, exercise levels, or burnout scores, nor were significant correlations seen between any of these metrics and AUD.



Discussion

- The 35% prevalence of risky alcohol use and the 17% prevalence of AUD in UNM SOM medical students is similar to that seen in other studies of medical students^{1,5} and physicians². Our female students, however, engage in significantly more risky alcohol use than our male students, a trend not seen in the national literature.
- There was no observed difference in rates of alcohol abuse or dependence between the genders in our study, although this difference is seen in practicing physicians². We will continue to analyze the gender differences in alcohol use patterns in UNM students in order to explain these observations.
- Our study did NOT show an association between risky drinking or AUD and age, level of engagement in self-care, exercise levels, or burnout scores as has been seen in other studies⁵.
- Comparisons with other studies were limited by inconsistent use of the AUDIT-C screening tool across papers, by the use of other screening tools, and by inconsistent definitions of risky alcohol use and AUD.

Conclusions

- A large percentage of UNM medical students engage in risky alcohol use and alcohol use patterns. While these patterns are mostly consistent with national patterns, they are concerning given the impact of alcohol on physician errors and behaviors.
- Research is needed on best way to discuss and address alcohol use behavior in medical students and to better understand how ETOH patterns in medical school change or persist during residency training and practice.
- Research is needed on the gender gap seen in practicing physicians and in our students.

References

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