REVISTA O MUNDO DA SAÚDE

Profile of drug abuse among Pharmacy students at a university in Piauí

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Abstract

A descriptive, cross-sectional, quantitative study was carried out among students from the initial and final semesters of the Pharmacy course at the Federal University of Piauí (UFPI) during 2019, seeking to analyze the profile of drug abuse among students, subject of scarce publications in Piauí. A closed-answer questionnaire based on the adapted "ASSIST" version was applied, after approval by the UFPI Research Ethics Committee. Fisher's exact test was used to apply an association hypothesis with a significance of 5%. The survey included 41 participants, 56.0% female and 29.0% male. 63.0% of participants were aged 20 years or more and 22.0% were under 20 years old. It was found that 90.2% reported having already used some abused drug. 17.1% of the students reported having used illegal drugs. The significant majority ($p < 0.05$) of the individuals who used drugs corresponded to the older participants involved in the study. Among the participants who used drugs, the significant majority ($p < 0.05$) indicated use of legal drugs. 4 (9.8%) participants did not use any drugs, and all belonged to the first semesters of the course. There was a predominance of alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and marijuana. There was an absolute majority of students who stated that they had never tried to control or decrease their drug use (n=31), regardless of the semester taken. The research confirms the importance of the theme and demonstrates the need for constant monitoring of the university population.

Keywords: Illicit drugs, students, pharmacy, universities.

INTRODUCTION

Abused drugs are characterized as substances with actions on the central nervous system (CNS), causing changes in the superior and sensory neural functions, associated with the risk of causing chemical and physical dependence[1]. The consumption of these substances worldwide has become worrisome as to the considerable impact not only health, but also on the economy and public safety. In 2018, the number of users of the most diverse drugs in the world reached around 269 million, with young people between 15 and 24 years of age being the most vulnerable, as it is an age group still in physical and psychological development[2].

In Brazil, the scenario is no different according to the III national survey on drug use, 7.4% of young people between 18 and

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24 years old used illicit drugs in the year prior to the relevant survey, given that the percentage in population between 12 and 65 years old was 3.2% for the same scenario[3]. In addition to the age group, the environment in which they are inserted is mentioned by the scientific literature as a factor that influences contact with various drugs[4]. A study carried out with 406 students from a university in São Paulo is an example, where general drug approval rates were observed by the research participants resulting in 29.8% who approved experimentation with tobacco and 15.5% with marijuana, and 3.7% of the students admitted having first contact with crack[5].

This is an especially important environment as it concentrates the professionals who are training to work in the most diverse areas of society. The performance of epidemiological analyses involving the use of substances without prescription by university students is of fundamental importance. The design, therefore, of intervention proposals for this scenario involves identifying the profile of users and consequently the factors that contribute to drug abuse. Without this exposure of reality, which the data offer, it is difficult to implement an intervention that actually changes the situation presented[6]. In the state of Piauí, there are few studies that relate the university community and the use of drugs. There is a need for further research in the area, as past data shows the use of several substances without a prescription by students from some universities in the state[7,8].

Based on what was exposed, the objective of this study was to analyze the profile of drug abuse among students in the initial and final semesters of the bachelor's degree in Pharmacy course at the Federal University of Piauí (UFPI), with the university population of the course as the parameter for the use of drugs, since these are the professionals responsible for disseminating knowledge about the use of substances for therapeutic purposes. Based on the situation presented by the study, the design of the intervention strategies and the education of the academic population may be improved, both from the point of view of substance abuse, drug addiction, and self-medication.

METHOD

This was a descriptive, cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach carried out among students from the initial (2nd and 3rd) and final (8th and 9th) semesters of the bachelor's degree in Pharmacy course at UFPI, Campus Universitário Ministro Petrônio Portella, Teresina, Piauí, Brazil, during 2019. The sample was chosen for convenience and included only those students who agreed to participate in the research. Initially, all students from the aforementioned periods received the necessary clarifications regarding the stages of the study and after full understanding they were invited to sign an Informed Consent Form (ICF), of which one of the copies was collected in order to start data collection through a questionnaire.

A questionnaire adapted from closed answers based on the study tool, Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) was applied, with the application of the following questions involving the use of psychoactive substances (tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, stimulants, sedatives, inhalants, hallucinogens, and opiates): 1 - In your life which one(s) of these substances have you used?, 2 - During the past three months, how often did you use this(these) substance(s) that you mentioned?, 3 - Have you ever

tried to control, decrease, or stop using and failed?. The variables age, sex, and semester were also collected[9].

This study was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Federal University of Piauí (CEP) under the Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Appreciation (CAAE) No. 15317219.5.0000.5214. The research started after approval by the CEP (Opinion Approval No. 3.429.420) and was carried out in accordance with the ethical precepts established in the resolution of the National Health Council (CNS/MS) No. 466/12, which addresses the guidelines and regulatory standards to be followed in research involving human beings, with guaranteed total anonymity to the participants involved.

The information obtained was organized in Microsoft Excel® 2013 spreadsheets and analyzed using the GraphPad Prism® version 5.0 software. Fisher's exact test was used to apply the hypothesis of association between the defined variables with a significance of 5%. At the end, the data were presented in the form of graphs and tables for analysis from the scientific literature related to the research theme.

RESULTS

The survey included 41 participants. Of these, 23 (56.0%) were female and 12 (29.0%) were male, both self-declared. There were 06 (14.6%) students who did not report their gender. With regard to age, 26 (63.0%) participants were 20 years old or older at the time of the survey, 09 (22.0%) individuals were under 20 years old, and 06 (15.0%) were not reported age. However, it is noteworthy that all participants were over 18 years old (Table 1).

It was found that 37 (90.2%) students reported having used at least one abused drug in their lives. It should be noted that in the analysis of the variables (data not shown), there was no statistical significance between self-reported sex and the occurrence of drug abuse. Among those who reported their gender and reported having used drugs (n=31), 20 were women and 11 were men. Therefore, the 06 participants who did not report their sex had used drugs.

Regarding the type of drug, there was a predominance of legal drug use (73.2%). However, 17.1% (n=7) of the students reported having used illicit drugs. Among female participants, 13.0% (n=3) reported having already used illicit drugs, while among male students, a percentage of 33.3% (n=4) was found for those who stated they have used illicit drugs. There was no statistical significance (data not shown) between the type of drug used and the sex of the participant. In addition, there were 6 participants who self-declared their sex and reported the use of both legal and illegal drugs.

Table 2, in turn, presents the results related to the use of drugs according to the age of the research participants. There was a predominance of drug abuse among participants who reported being 20 years old or older (80.6%). The statistical test indicates that the significant majority ($p < 0.05$) of the research subjects who have already used drugs corresponds to the older participants involved in the study.

When relating the type of drug consumed with the age of the participants (data not shown), no statistical significance was found between the two variables, that is, there was no significant relationship between the

type of drug consumed (licit or illicit) and the participant's age group, differently from what was observed in table 2. There were another 06 participants who reported their age and reported the use of both legal and illegal drugs.

In turn, Table 3 shows the relationship between the use of drugs and the type of drug, whether legal or illegal. It was observed that among the participants who have already used drugs, most respondents ($p<0.05$) indicated using legal drugs (76.6%). It was observed that at the time of the study, the significant majority of students never used illicit drugs (88.2%). It is noteworthy that there were 10 students who reported the use of both licit and illicit drugs, 01 participant indicated having used only illicit drugs, and 04 did not use any drugs.

Only 4 (9.8%) survey participants (Table 1) did not use any drugs, and all belonged to the initial semesters of the course. From the statistical analysis of these variables, it was found that there is no statistical significance between the use of drugs and the semester that was being taken (data not shown).

In the study population, it was seen that among the participants who reported having already used legal or illegal drugs (n=37), 43.2% were from the initial semesters of the Pharmacy course, and 21 (56.8 %) belonged to the final semesters.

Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of the types of drugs used on at least one occasion by students in the Pharmacy course at UFPI since their admission to college until the completion of this study.

All participants who reported never having used any drug in their life were in the first semesters of the Pharmacy course (n=4). Among the drugs consumed, the use of alcoholic beverages predominated (48%), followed by tobacco (16%), marijuana (13%), hypnotics/sedatives (7%), inhalants (4%), and amphetamines or ecstasy (3%). It was found that the consumption of illicit drugs was more significant among students in the final semesters when compared to the use by students in the initial semesters. For those graduating, there was mention of the consumption of hallucinogens and cocaine or crack (n=1, respectively). Alcohol was the most cited drug among students in the initial semesters, as well as among those who were in their final semesters, followed by tobacco.

The third question in the questionnaire was: "Have you ever tried to control, decrease, or stop the use of the first drug, second drug and so on in your life? The answers were divided into "no, never", "yes, but not in the last 3 months", "yes, in the last 3 months" (period in which the participant is enrolled to the university), as shown in figure 2.

Among students in the final semesters, a greater number of affirmative responses was observed (n=6) including the option "yes, in the last 3 months". It is important to note that the drugs chosen by the participants in this question were mostly lawful and the only illegal substance mentioned was marijuana (n=1). In this case, the participant tried to stop or control its use in the last 3 months.

Affirmative responses including "Yes, in the last 3 months" were chosen to a lesser extent by participants in the initial semesters (n=3) without, however, showing a statistically significant difference in relation to students in the final periods.

In a similar way to the students of the final semesters, it can be observed that everyone who claimed to have tried to control, decrease, or stop the use of the substances presented did so in relation to legal drugs (n=3). There was, however, an absolute majority of students who stated that they had never tried to control or decrease drug use (n=31), regardless of the semester they were in.

Table 1- Distribution of sex, age, drug use, and types of drugs used by research participants (n=41). Teresina (PI), 2020.

Variables	n	%
Sex		
Male	12	29.0
Female	23	56.0
Uninformed	06	15.0
Age		
<20 years	09	22.0
≥20 years	26	63.0
Uninformed	06	15.0
Drug Use		
Yes	37	90.2
No	04	9.8
Types of drugs used		
Lawful	30	73.2
Illicit	07	17.1
Uninformed	04	9.7

Table 2 - Use of drugs among Pharmacy students at UFPI according to the age of the participants. Teresina (PI), 2020.

Drug Use	Faixa etária**						p*
	< 20 years		≥ 20 years		Total		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Yes	6	19.4	25	80.6	31	100.0	
No	3	75.0	1	25	4	100.0	0.0441
Total	9	25.7	26	74.3	35	100.0	

Caption: * Fisher's exact test (p <0.05). **There were 06 (six) participants who did not inform their age.

Table 3 - Drugs use among Pharmacy students at UFPI according to the type of drug reported. Teresina (PI), 2020.

Drug Use	Tipo de droga de abuso**						p*
	Legal		Illegal		Total		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Yes	36	76.6	11	23.4	47	100.0	
No	4	11.8	30	88.2	34	100.0	0.0001
Total	40	49.4	41	50.6	81	100.0	

Caption: *Fisher's exact test (p <0.05). **There were 10 (ten) participants who reported using both legal and illegal drugs; 01 (one) participant indicated the use of illicit drugs only; 04 (four) individuals reported that they did not use drugs of any kind.

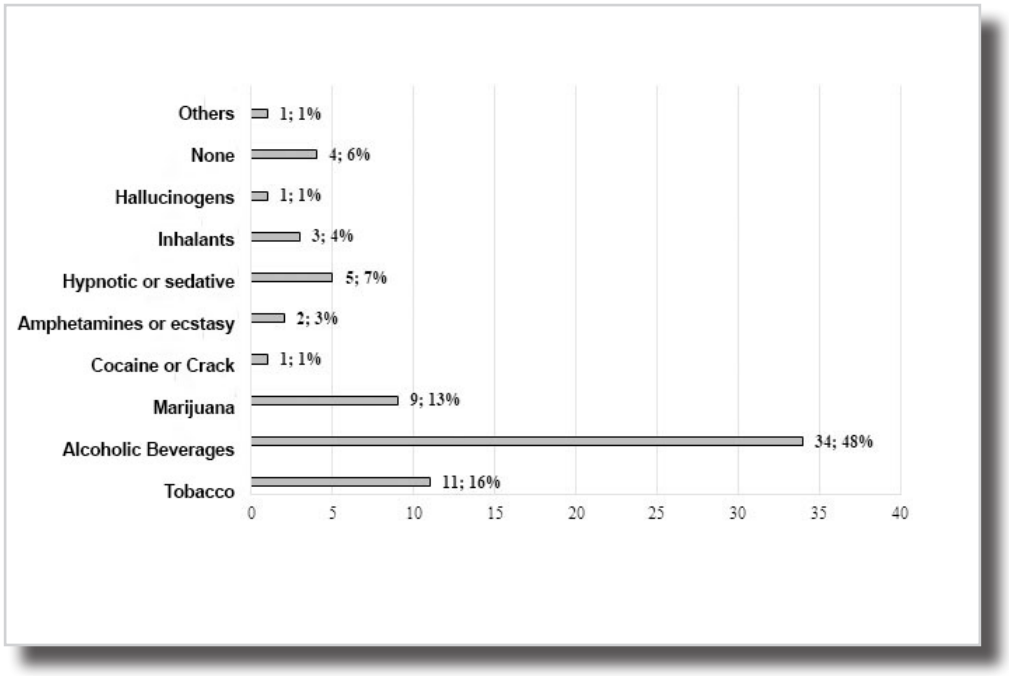

Figure 1 - Frequency distribution of drugs used in life by students in the Pharmacy course at UFPI. Teresina (PI), 2020.

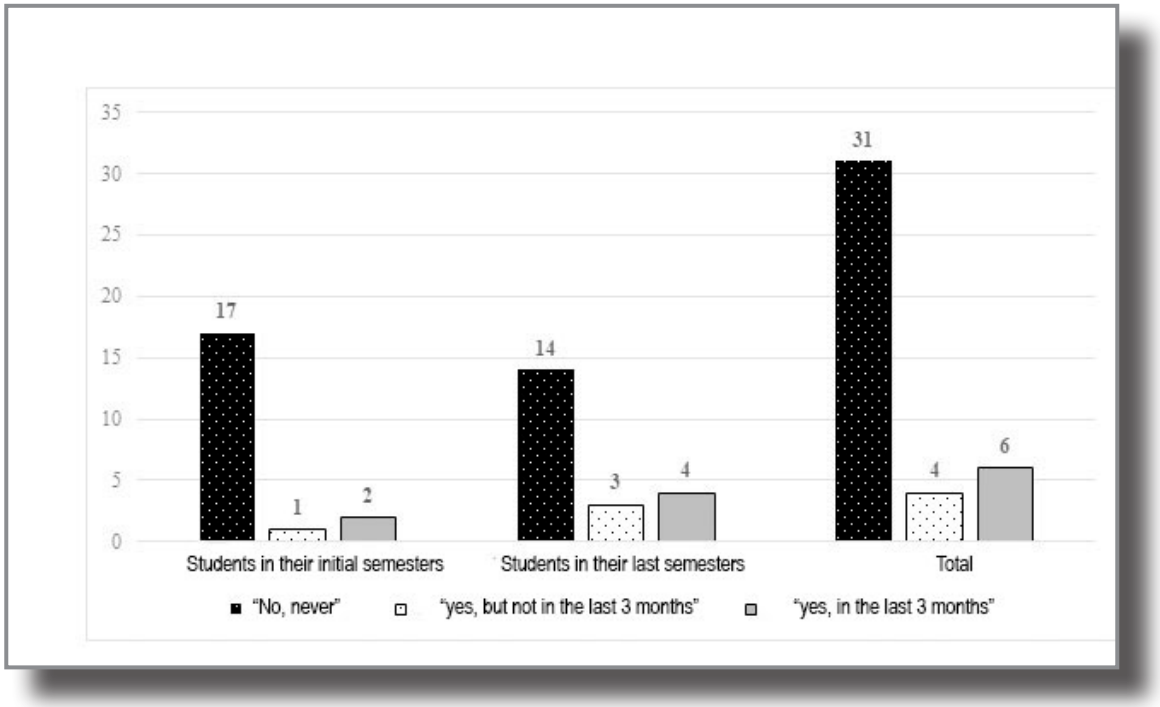

Figure 2 - Profile of participants' responses to the question about attempting to control, decrease, or stop drug use. Teresina (PI), 2020.

DISCUSSION

The excessive use of drugs by university students is a serious public health problem that affects several countries in the world[10-13]. At a university in the city of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, a study involving 406 students from different fields of knowledge verified the use of marijuana, tobacco, and alcohol by students[12]. In Europe, a study with the participation of 592 students in the health field, concluded that 73.3% of the participants used alcohol alone or in combination with marijuana and other illegal drugs in the country[13].

Most of the students who participated in the current survey were female (56%), which exemplifies the scenario of a majority of women occupying Brazilian universities[14]. However, the variable "sex" was not significant for the consumption of drugs. This result may be associated with the small number of the sample surveyed[15]. In this same perspective, a study conducted with 275 students from a university in the interior of São Paulo, found that alcohol consumption between men and women was similar, while the use of drugs illicit drugs, such as cocaine, were prevalent among male participants[16].

The age group was also an important variable analyzed. It was found that 63% of the participants were 20 years old or older (Table 1). This same age group (≥ 20 years), most of them significant (80.6%; p = 0.0441) referred to using drugs (Table 2). However, the "age" factor was not significant in terms of the type of drug used, whether legal or illegal. This finding implies the need for constant monitoring of the UFPI Pharmacy students regarding exposure to drugs, regardless of their age[2,3].

In addition, it was found that among the participants who have already used drugs, a significant majority (76.6%; p = 0.0001) used legal drugs (Table 3), which reinforces the social aspect of this theme and the relevance of awareness about the abuse of substances allowed both in the university environment and in the family. According to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), 13.5% of adult deaths between 20 and 39 years are caused by some factor linked to alcohol consumption[17]. Licit drugs were the most cited in the present study (Figure 1), which are the most used both in life and in the last three months of individuals' studies. Similarly, a study carried out with medical students indicated that alcohol consumption rates reached 98% in some cases[18]. Another study carried out in the city of Aracaju, SE with students in the health area indicated that 68.8% of the participants drank alcohol during the last year[19]. The abusive use of any substance becomes an aggravating factor when considered that the researched public consists of students in the health area.

As for the period studied, there was no significant variation in the consumption of drugs among students in the initial and final semesters of the Pharmacy course at UFPI, which confirms the need for constant monitoring of students in this perspective. It was observed that all participants who had never used drugs (n=4) were in initial semesters, which indicates the ideal time for carrying out health education initiatives, that is, already at the beginning of the undergraduate course. However, these data did not allow the analysis of other factors that may contribute to the use of drugs, such as individual, family, or social factors.

The increase in the consumption of drugs during higher education was mentioned in the research by Carmargo (2019), carried out with 49 undergraduate students from southeastern Brazil, in which they verified

that the students' state of mind (sadness, anxiety) significantly influenced the use or disuse of substances, than the knowledge about the drug in question[20]. In the state of Minas Gerais, a recent study that involved undergraduates from 3 areas of knowledge found that regardless of the area, the graduates of the respective courses increased their drug use[21]. This demonstrates the value of approaches and research on this topic in academic locations.

Tobacco and tobacco products were shown to be relevant in the present research as the second type of drug most used by both early and late semester students (Figure 1). Similarly, the study by Santos (2013) conducted in the state of Espírito Santo, showed that 33.0% of the psychology students at the federal university interviewed used tobacco or derivatives in their lives, surpassing the use of marijuana and tranquilizers[22]. In a recent survey conducted by PUC-SP with 338 medical students, it was observed that 16.4% of respondents used cigarettes weekly in the month prior to the survey[23].

Smoking kills more than 8 million people a year, 1.2 million of whom are passive smokers[24]. Smoking is associated with a higher incidence of lung cancer. According to the National Cancer Institute (INCA), smoking causes, in addition to hospitalizations and premature deaths, productivity losses due to disability that came to cost in 2015, more than 17 billion reais in indirect expenses, in addition to 39.4 billion reais with medical assistance[25].

Marijuana was the most cited illicit drug in the present study (Figure 1), which attests to the consumption of the main plant derivative used, banned in Brazil[3]. This finding indicates that the initial contact with the drug may have occurred at the university and corroborates the notability of actions within the educational institution to combat consumption and exposure to drugs, such as periodic student monitoring actions.

The use of the plant is associated with brain changes that tend to be more intense with chronic use. The user's sensitivity, genetic factors, as well as the origin of the drug, are factors that interfere in the damage caused to health. Some clinical manifestations can appear as psychotic conditions, impaired learning, and short-term memory[26].

Another considerable finding was that hypnotics/sedatives and amphetamines were mentioned by participants in the current survey (lifetime use and in the past three months) by both early and late semester students (Figure 1). Such substances appear as a special group because they comprise medications regulated in Brazil by Ordinance No. 344/98 of the Ministry of Health[27]. The opioid analgesic tramadol was mentioned by one participant. According to the 3rd National Survey on Drug Use by the Brazilian Population, the use of benzodiazepines and opioid analgesics is worrisome, since a significant portion of Brazilians use these substances differently from those prescribed or without prescription[3].

The use of drugs by students in the final semesters confirms the relevance of the research and the need for proactive actions of screening and monitoring the students, especially if it was considered that there was a student in the Pharmacy course at UFPI in this group who indicated having used drugs considered potentially devastating and with a strong positive reinforcement, such as cocaine and crack[1].

Some students claimed to have tried to control, decrease, or stop the use of drugs, both in life and in the past three months, with students in the final semesters being the majority (Figure 2). Chemical dependency has a complex etymology, there are genetic and environmental factors involved, so it is imperative that the process be accompanied because it is a chronic situation. Prejudices make it difficult to seek specialized care, as

well as making public policies that meet the needs presented impossible[28].

Furthermore, the current scenario of isolation and social distancing imposed by the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 in 2020, points to the need for an even deeper reflection on mental health issues. Substance abuse may be intensified, as well as other psychological disorders. Groups that are already vulnerable should be the objective of targeted actions so that appropriate treatment is implemented and the use of drugs and/or excessive medications is avoided[29].

CONCLUSION

The use of drugs by university students is shown to be a notable health issue and is the target of several studies. There was a predominance of drug abuse among the older students of the Pharmacy course at UFPI, as well as a significant majority that consumed legal drugs. Knowledge does not alienate students from substances that are known to cause damage to health. Freedom of choice may be mistakenly linked to the need for exposure to all the experiences that the university environment can offer, including those related to the use of substances that promote pleasure and socialization, characteristics that some legal and illegal substances have.

Sex did not significantly interfere with the type of drug used. Likewise, the students' semester did not appear to interfere in the consumption profile. Such findings may be associated with the main limitation of the research, which consisted of the reduced sample size.

Mostly, the consumption of alcohol and tobacco was verified. Among the participants who used drugs, the significant majority used legal drugs. However, there was a significant frequency of participants who mentioned using marijuana. In addition, the use of hallucinogens, cocaine, or crack was reported by high school students. The occurrence of sedatives, hypnotics, benzodiazepines, opioids, and stimulants mentioned by the participants should be highlighted. However, it should be noted that in this study, only drugs obtained without a prescription were considered.

Public policies aimed at the academic community are relevant so that they are outlined and applied in a correct and comprehensive manner, along with demonstrating the need for constant monitoring of this target audience, which in turn, confirms the importance of the problem in view, as well as the irrational use of medication.

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