

Could inter-agency working reduce emergency department attendances due to alcohol consumption?

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Abstract

Background: Excess alcohol consumption and associated harms in terms of health, crime and disorder have been highlighted by the government and media, causing considerable public concern. This study quantified the number of patient attendances at an urban adult and children's emergency department (ED) directly attributable to alcohol intoxication, and investigated ways in which the inter-agency sharing of anonymised information could be used to design, implement and monitor interventions to reduce these harms.

Methods: Intoxicated patients attending either the adult or children's ED were prospectively identified by qualified nursing staff and anonymised data collected by a dedicated researcher. Collaboration and data sharing between health, police, social services, university experts and local authorities was achieved through the establishment of steering and operational groups with agreed objectives and the formation of a shared anonymised database.

Results: The proportion of patients attending the ED as a result of alcohol intoxication was 4% in adults and <1% in children. 70% of patients were male, with a mean age of 30 years, and 72% attended between 20.00 and 08.00 h. The most common reason for ED attendance was accident (34%), followed closely by assault (30%). 27% of patients had done most of their drinking at home, 36% in a pub and 16% in a nightclub. Inter-agency collaboration proved highly successful: pooling of anonymised data created a much clearer picture of the extent of the problem and immediately suggested strategies for intervention.

Conclusions: The initiative to achieve inter-agency collaboration and data sharing was highly successful, with clear potential for the development and implementation of interventions that will reduce ED attendance due to excess alcohol consumption.

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