Substance use, mental health and sexual behaviour of university students in Bhutan

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Background

The Kingdom of Bhutan is often characterised as ‘the last Shangrila’, and has adopted ‘Gross National Happiness’ as the foundation of wellbeing and development. Exposure to other lifestyles and values have been embraced by many young Bhutanese creating tensions with traditional culture and values; much of this associated with concerns about substance use, sexual behaviour and mental health.

Methods

Self-administered survey of 2471 of students in 8 campuses of the Royal University of Bhutan across Bhutan. Measures included: substance use, sexual behaviour and mental health.

Results

The most popular reason for the use of various substances amongst the college students was curiosity, except for alcohol and cough syrup.

Alcohol was consumed for having fun and Cough syrup for relieving pain.

The other most popular reasons for using various substances were the influence of friends, media, and stress.

Reasons such as parental influence and boredom played minor roles.

Substance use among the students was relatively low and sexual risk behaviour by over 50% of sexually active students. Lifetime use of cannabis at 11.8% for male college students was far lower the 2016 WHO student survey which found 28.3%.

Use of doma (betel nut) warrants attention, given known health risks, and despite cultural acceptance.

Most substances were perceived to be harmful to extremely harmful. For example, Doma (betel nut), despite its level of use, was viewed as harmful/extremely harmful by 58.5%, alcohol by 78.8%, Baba (chewing tobacco) by 83.1% and tobacco by 86.1%.

However, Doma was reported as safe/mostly safe by 21.3% (with 20.3% not sure), and Alcohol by 10.7%.

Cannabis was seen as safe/mostly safe by 4.6%, and harmful/extremely harmful by 82.5%.

About 70-80% viewed Nitrazepam, Diazepam, SP [dextropropoxyphene hydrochloride, paracetamol], Relepin [Dextromorphan, Dicyclamine hydrochloride, paracetamol], heroin and brown sugar as harmful/extremely harmful.

Mental health concerns were identified by about 10% of students. Suicidal ideation reported by 12.7%, and suicide attempts by 3.7%.

Conclusions

Although the current findings for substance use among the surveyed college students in Bhutan are not alarming, but taken together with data for suicidality there are enough reasons for educators, health workers and policy makers to be concerned.

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