

Substance Abuse and Dependence : In the Records of the Iraqi Hospitals and Health Centers During the Year 2008

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ABSTRACT:

BACKGROUND:

Substance abuse is expected to be a growing problem in Iraq after 2003. Hospitals and health center's records can provide valuable information about this problem.

OBJECTIVE:

To know the number of substance abuse cases presented to our health services during 2008, to explore the socio-demographic characteristics of patients and types of substance use, and to compare the results with those of 2001,2002, and 2007.

METHODS:

The records of substance abuse that are periodically sent from hospitals and health centers to the Ministry of Health were studied. Records of 2008 were studied in details and compared with the figures recorded in the years 2001, 2002, and 2007 to have an idea about the progress of the problem of substance abuse before and after 2003.

RESULTS :

There was 1462 cases recorded in 2008. Males were much more than females (96.4% vs. 3.6%), most cases were above the age of 18 years of age (95.8%). Most cases (87.5%) were presented to the outpatient clinics rather than to inpatient units. Prescription drug abuse was the most common type (74.6%). There was no increase in cases recorded before and after in 2003.

CONCLUSION:

This study may indicate that the size of substance abuse related health problems in Iraq is small or is underreported. The socio-demographic pattern is similar to what was found by other studies in Iraq.

KEY WORDS: substance abuse, dependence, Iraq , 2008.

INTRODUCTION:

Many stories in the media have reported on rising substance use in Iraq after 2003⁽¹⁾. Epidemiological studies of substance abuse before 2003 are few but the reports of the WHO had mentioned that Iraq is one of the clean countries regarding substance abuse⁽²⁾. Iraq Mental Health Survey (IMHS) 2006/07 had reported a lifetime prevalence rate of substance abuse of 0.92⁽³⁾. The IMHS did not give details about the trend of substance abuse in Iraq nor give all the details about all the socio-demographic characteristics of people who were found to be substance abusers. Epidemiological studies focusing on substance abuse alone were not done till now, they are difficult, expensive. Accurate measure of the substance abuse problem is not possible because patients may hide their problem due to social stigma and worries about legal consequences⁽⁴⁾. One of the good indicators about substance abuse is the records of hospitals and health centers. Although the recording system in Iraq is not ideal, it may give an

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idea about the size of substance abuse related health problems which may be useful in planning of substance abuse services.

Studies about substance abuse in Iraq had revealed that substance abuse is more prevalent among young males and prescription drug abuse is the most common type^(5,6,7).

AIMS OF THE STUDY:

In this study we examined the data of substance abuse drawn from the records of hospitals and health centers. The aims are: to know the number of substance abuse cases presented to our health services during 2008, to explore the socio-demographic characteristics of patients and types of substance use, and to compare the results with those of 2001,2002, and 2007 to find if there is any important increase or decrease in cases before and after 2003.

METHODS:

We studied the data of substance abuse of the year 2008. In 2008 data were available from 10 out of the 18 governorates of Iraq. The governorates that had sent data were Baghdad, Basrah, Najaf, Kerbela, Babel, Diala, Thi Qar, Al-Diwaniyya, Al-Muthanna

,and Kirkuk. The data included information about the number of substance abuse cases for each governorate separately, distributed according to gender, age which was divided into two groups one below and one above 18 years, type of substance abuse which included 3 categories; prescription drug abuse, alcohol abuse and hashish abuse, and types of health services utilized by patients (outpatient vs. inpatient). The data were studied and compared with the number of recorded cases in 2001, 2002, and 2007.

RESULTS:

There was 1462 cases recorded in 2008 (data were obtained from 10 governorates only). Males were much more than females (1410 vs.52), there were 61 patients under the age of 18 while the others were 18 and above (4.2% vs. 95.8%). Most cases (87.5%) were presented to the outpatient clinics. Prescription drug abuse was the most common type (74.6%). When comparing data from the same governorates that were recorded in the years 2001, 2002 and 2007; it was found that there is no significant increase in cases recorded before and after 2003.

Table 1: Distribution of patients according to gender, age and type of service(2008).

Governorate	Gender		AGE		Type of service		Total
	Male	Female	< 18 years	≥ 18 years	Outpatients	Inpatient	
Baghdad	442	26	29	439	411	57	468
Basrah	329	-	-	329	220	109	329
Najaf	249	-	-	249	249	-	249
Babil	119	-	2	117	118	1	119
Kerbela	102	6	4	104	108	-	108
Thi Qar	81	-	11	70	81	-	81
Diala	42	19	10	46	49	12	61
Al -Muthanna	24	-	-	24	24	-	24
Al -Diwaniyya	21	1	-	22	16	6	22
Kirkuk	1	-	-	1	1	-	1
Total	1410 (96.4%)	52 (3.6%)	61 (4.2%)	1401 (95.8%)	1282 (87.5%)	180 (12.5%)	1462 (100%)

Table 2: Distribution of patients according to the type of abused substances (2008).

Governorate	Prescription drugs	Alcohol	Hashish	Total
Baghdad	314	134	20	468
Basrah	329	-	-	329
Najaf	249	-	-	249
Babil	1	118	-	119
Kerbela	108	-	-	108
Thi Qar	8	73	-	81
Diala	59	2	-	61
Al-Muthanna	-	24	-	24
Al-Diwaniyya	22	-	-	22
Kirkuk	1	-	-	1
Total	1091 (74.6%)	335 (24%)	20 (1.4%)	1462 (100%)

Table 3: Comparison between cases of substance abuse recorded during 2001, 2002, 2007 & 2008.

Governorate	2001	2002	2007	2008
Baghdad	533	487	٥٥٦	٤٦٨
Basrah	390	402	٣٥٠	٣٢٩
Najaf	112	78	٢٢	٢٤٩
Babil	38	64	٥	١١٩
Kerbela	207	199	٣٠٠	١٠٨
Thi Qar	92	225	٣٤٧	٨١
Al-Muthanna	34	52	٦٢	٢٤
Al - Diwaniyya	19	13	٨	٢٢
Kirkuk	21	11	٠	١
Total	1446	1531	١٦٥٠	١٤٠١

DISCUSSION :

The number of patients recorded looks lower than the expected if we put in mind the lifetime prevalence of 0.92 recorded by IMHS. This can be due to under-reporting by patients or to problems in the recording system of the MOH. One of the common problems is that abusers who attend hospitals for medical reasons are given medical diagnoses and this view is supported by some studies which found higher percentages of substance abuse problems in medical units⁽⁸⁾. The highest number of cases was recorded in Baghdad which may be due to its large population and to the presence of 2 psychiatric hospitals and 5 psychiatric units in the city. Basrah city was ranked as the second and this could be due to its location as a port and has more access towards other countries especially Iran and Gulf states.

Males were found to be much more than females (96.4% vs. 3.6%) . The trend of substance abuse in the middle east indicates higher ratios of substance abuse in males compared to females although this gap is narrowing in North America and European countries⁽⁸⁾. This result is compatible with the IMHS findings. This could be due to lower substance abuse among females or to different female pattern of substance abuse that causes less harm than male pattern. It may also indicates that substance abuse problems are underreported in females due to cultural reasons.

Problems were less in people under 18 years which could be explained by the need to several years to get harm and to seek medical help or to under-reporting of adolescent's problems.

The types of substances recorded were mainly prescription drugs (74.6%) and alcohol (24%). This is compatible with previous studies done in Iraq^(3,5,6). Hashish was recorded in Baghdad and this may be the first time that such a problem is recorded. This could be alarming towards a change in the pattern of

substance abuse in Iraq after 2003. Other problems expected to be found like inhalants that are prevalent among adolescents and anabolic steroids abused by young males for building muscles were not recorded. There was no increase in cases of substance abuse recorded in the years before and after 2003 which may contradicts the view of rapid growing of the problem of substance abuse in Iraq after 2003.

We cannot ignore the fact that there are many gaps in the recording system of substance abuse in the MOH as we couldn't find the records of all the Iraqi governorates during the mentioned 4 years so we compared the records of only 10 governorates. Many socio-demographic and clinical data were not present.

CONCLUSION:

The substance abuse cases that are recorded by hospitals and health centers were low which may reflect a small problem of substance abuse or a non-efficient recording system in Iraq. The socio-demographic characteristics are not different from other studies in Iraq and the Middle East. No clear increase of substance abuse problems reported before and after 2003.

We suggest that epidemiological studies should be done through the community to have a better idea about the size of the substance abuse problems in Iraq. The education programs should focus on the young population as they are the most risky group. The prescription drugs abuse was the most common which may call for a better drug control policy by the MOH.

We stress also the need to evaluate and improve the recording system of substance abuse in the MOH.

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