

## Public Attitudes toward Substance Abuse

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### Abstract

Substance abuse is growing problem in Iraq especially after 2003. Increase accessibility of drugs due to increase trafficking through Iraq from neighboring countries, especially Afghanistan and Iran which has a high incidence of substance use disorder, causes a real concern for Iraqi health professionals.

**Objective:** To evaluate the attitudes and beliefs of population about substance abuse and addiction.

**Method:** Self-administered questionnaire including 19 items covered seven topics in substance use disorders. Addiction models, dangerousness and criminality, age group, causes, treatment, prevention and the future of the phenomenon in Iraq. It was distributed to 342 persons 190 males and 152 females, from different occupations; school teachers, university students' theology students and governmental and private sector employees.

**Results:** The majority (84.5%) believed that addiction is moral issue while (62.5%) regarded it as a medical problem. About 70% viewed the abuser as dangerous. Only (18.5%) blamed the family as a cause of addiction. Although (73%) believed in faith treatment, still (64%) believed in medical treatment. Religion was cited as the most preventive factor (83%), and only (32%) believed that substance use problems are growing in Iraq.

**Conclusion:** Some of the public beliefs are different from scientific facts, but consistent with other cultural beliefs. Public mental health education should be an essential part of substance abuse prevention program.

**Key words:** Public, Attitudes, Substance Abuse, Karbala, Iraq

### الخلاصة

تمت دراسة توجهات المجتمع نحو ظاهرة سوء استخدام المواد والعقاقير (الإدمان) في محافظة كربلاء المقدسة باستخدام استبيان يحتوي على 19 سؤال. شملت العينة 324 شخص، 190 ذكر و 152 أنثى تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من أربع فئات: معلمين المدارس المتوسطة والاعدادية، طلبة جامعيين، طلبة العلوم الدينية، العاملين في القطاع العام والخاص. أظهرت النتائج أن 84.5% يعتقدون أن الإدمان ظاهرة أخلاقية مقابل 62% يعتقدون أنها ظاهرة مرضية 70% يعتقدون إن المدمن شخص خطر على المجتمع. يمثل الدين العامل الرئيسي في الوقاية 83% وإن 32% يعتقدون إن الإدمان سوف يتنامى في العراق إن توجهات ومعتقدات المشاركين تختلف عن الحقائق العلمية وبعضها يتشابه مع توجهات المجتمعات الأخرى. الوعي الصحي النفسي مطلوب لزيادة تفهم المجتمع لهذه الظاهرة.

## Introduction

Substance misuse is a universal phenomenon that, affect all levels of society. Increasing drug misuse generally has caused a host of social, behavioral, psychological and physical problems among population.

Increase accessibility of drugs due to increase trafficking through Iraq from neighboring countries, especially Afghanistan and Iran, which has a high incidence of substance use disorders? <sup>(1)</sup> causes a real concern for Iraqi health professionals.

The role of prevention is to create a healthy community by understanding the population view, attitudes, needs and readiness to address prevention program. While surveys of public beliefs have been carried out in a number of countries, little is known about cross- cultural differences in mental health literacy. The objective of our study is to evaluate the attitudes and beliefs of population about substance abuse and addiction in order to establish a substance abuse preventive program

## Method

This survey was carried out in Karbala governorate, Iraq, during January and February, 2005. Karbala is a holy city. It contains the holy shrine of Imam Hussein, the grand son of prophet Mohammad, its population around 900000.

The sample consists of four community groups. Secondary schoolteachers; 86 females 23 males from eight schools, six in urban areas and two in rural areas. University students, college of education, department of psychology; fourth grade; 46 females, 22 males. Theology (non governmental religious institute called Hawza) students; 89 males. Private and governmental employees; 20 females and 56 males.

The study subjects consist of 342 participants, 152 females' and 190 males. Male to Female ratio was 1.25: 1.

Systematic sampling process was done by selecting every other person.

The survey instrument was a self administered questionnaire designed by the researcher which covers seven topics in substance use disorders. The model of addiction, dangerousness and criminality, age groups, causes, treatment, prevention, and future of phenomenon in Iraq. The total numbers of questions are nineteen. For each question there are four responses, yes, sometime, no, and I don't know.

The participants were asked to choose only one response. The questionnaire estimated to take fifteen to twenty minutes to be completed. Pretest study was done and the questionnaire was modified accordingly.

Eight medical assistants, from directorate of health, department of primary health care, mental health unit, were recruited for the purpose of the study. They had two days training about substance use disorders and how to apply the questionnaire.

Data coding, entry and management was done using SPSS 2003. The responses of the all sample was presented in numbers and percentage. The only yes response of each subgroup also presented in numbers and percentage to show the differences between subgroups.

Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants and all official consent was obtained from university, directorate of education and other offices.

## Results

The age of the sample ranged from 18 to 78 years mean was  $(31.1 \pm 7.6)$

The mean age of males was  $32.2 \pm 8.4$  and of females was  $30 \pm 6.8$ .

Tale -1- showed the responses of all participants, the yes response showed that (84.5%) believed in moral model of addiction, while (62.5%) believed in medical model. Seventy percents regarded the substance abuser a dangerous person, and only (18.5%) blamed the family as a cause of addiction.

Three quarter of the sample realized that adolescences are a risk factor, (73. %) believed in faith treatment versus (64%) believed in medical treatment. Religion was cited as the most preventive factor (83%) and only (32%) believed that addiction is a growing problem in Iraq. Table-2- showed the only yes response of the subgroups.

## Discussion

Negative attitudes and stereotyped perceptions of substance abusers are held widely among different cultures. In both the treatment and research area of alcohol and drug misuse, divergent and conflicting beliefs about the nature of substance use disorders are quite common, for example, there are conflicting views on whether substance use disorders is really a disease<sup>(2)</sup>.

Most participants believed that addiction is a moral problem more than medical problem, especially theology students. This is similar to Americans who believed that illicit drugs use is moral rather than a public health issue,<sup>(3)</sup> and for British people who disagreed with the idea that 'drug addicts' have a mental illness and regarded them as untrustworthy, deceitful and unreliable,<sup>(4)</sup> This view may delay or prevent families from referring their patients for medical services but it should be utilized in preventive aspects by including this issue in educational programs.

Although the majority of the sample viewed the substance abuse as moral defect, but more than half did not regarded the abusers as criminals. This may facilitate changing the attitude of population toward better understanding of the nature of the phenomenon.

The belief of dangerousness in addiction is consistent across cultures. Iraqi and British had the same view<sup>(5)</sup>

The public clearly overestimate the risk of dangerousness, because of media reports and dramatic portrayals<sup>(6)</sup>.

Using media to change the attitudes of public is an important step in mental health education and combating mental health literacy.

Substance dependence is determined by psychosocial, cultural, environmental as well as biological and genetic factors and—although more is now known about this complex disorder, scientists are still unable to predict which individuals will become dependent before or after they take drugs.<sup>(7)</sup>

Our study subjects reported that the person, the family, and the society had minimum effect on the addictive behavior especially the family and this is inconsistent with most studies.

British population frequently rated people with alcoholism and drug abuse as to blamed for their disorders and capable of helping themselves<sup>(8)</sup>. Parenting behavior and family functioning have a clear relationship to the

development of drug problems in adolescents and family relationship may protect against development of drug problems<sup>(9)</sup>. Personality traits are thought to contribute to drugs experimentation and influences occur in individuals from families and society<sup>(10)</sup>

Addressing the role of the family and understanding the substance use problems as multidimensional issue should form the basis of preventive program.

There is increasing concern about illicit drug use and associated problems among young people specially teenagers.<sup>(11)</sup> Studies in USA estimates of nearly one fourth of adolescents from 12-17 years of age have been use illicit drugs<sup>(12)</sup>

Private and governmental sector employees and theology students reported, that substance abuse problems among teenagers more than teachers and university students .This may reflect that, this problem is more prevalent among teenagers who are not attending schools , or poor awareness of

teachers & university students toward the problem .

Substance abuse problems should be part of the university curriculum, and teachers' education and training are imperative.

Our study subjects believed in faith treatment more than medical treatment. This may reflect their idea, that addiction is moral issue, and the tradition of the society to seek help from faith healers (shakhe, mullah) before attending medical services .This attitude should be changed through public education because when addiction had occurred religious involvement per se rarely alter the course of addiction <sup>(13)</sup>

The majority believed that religion is the most important preventive factor .It is found that religious involvement greatly reduce risk for troublesome use of substance by children, adolescents and adults <sup>(13)</sup> In England, religion had a significant contribution to promoting a negative attitude toward drug use among adolescents <sup>(14)</sup> . Stressing on religion as an essential factor in multidisciplinary preventive program.

Substance abuse problems are growing in Iraq due to increased accessibility as result from increase trafficking through of drug according to united nation officials <sup>(15)</sup>.

Only one third of the sample was aware of this. Public education campaigns should be part of the educational program.

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**Table-1- The Participants Views toward Substance Use Disorders**

<b>Items</b>		<b>Yes</b>		<b>Some time</b>		<b>NO</b>		<b>I don't know</b>	
		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
1	Is addiction a medical disease?	215	62.5	58	17	56	16.5	13	4
2	Is addiction a moral defect?	288	84.5	29	8	25	7.5	0	0
3	Is the addict a criminal person and deserve punishment?	143	42	110	32	76	22	13	4
4	Is the addict dangerous to the society?	239	70	64	19	29	8	10	3
5	Is the addict blamed for his addiction?	150	44	96	28	66	19	30	9
6	Is the family blamed for the addiction of the person?	63	18.5	204	59.5	61	18	14	4
7	Is the society blamed for the addiction of the person?	129	37	148	43	50	15	17	5
8	Do you believe that children below 12 years of age develop addiction?	150	44	81	24	62	18	46	14
9	Do you believe that adolescents (12-18) years of age develop addiction?	254	74	50	15	16	7	12	4
10	Do you believe that medical treatment helps the patient?	219	64	82	24	27	8	14	4
11	Do you believe that improvement of socioeconomic state helps the patient?	218	64	81	24	29	8	12	4
12	Do you believe that faith treatment helps the patient?	249	73	59	16	24	7	15	4
13	Do you believe that using medication without prescription leads to addiction?	159	46	99	29	54	16	30	9
14	Do you believe that increased religious awareness prevents addiction?	285	83	25	7	19	6	13	4
15	Do you believe that increased health education prevents addiction?	263	77	39	12	25	7	15	4
16	Do you believe that improvement in economic state prevents addiction?	201	59	91	26	34	10	16	5
17	Do you believe that radical laws prevent addiction?	187	55	81	24	49	14	25	7
18	Do you believe that addiction is a growing problem in Iraq?	108	32	41	12	103	30	90	26
19	Do you believe that increased foreigner visitors increase the phenomenon?	170	50	97	28	44	13	31	9