



Motives for illicit prescription drug use among university students: A systematic review and meta-analysis



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 August 2016

Received in revised form 28 January 2017

Accepted 24 February 2017

Keywords:

Prescription drug misuse

University students

Systematic review

Meta-analysis

ABSTRACT

Background: There is a growing body of research on the motives for prescription drug misuse (PDM) among university students. However, the overall findings of this research are hard to decipher. Studies use different methods, they examine different drug types, the motives are phrased in various ways, and the results differ widely. In order to make sense of this body of knowledge, it is necessary to synthesise the results across studies and draw out conclusions.

Methods: The research comprises a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies on the motives of university students for illicit use of four different types of prescription medication (stimulants, analgesics, tranquillisers and sedatives). The search for studies was conducted on six bibliographic databases with stated criteria governing search eligibility and inclusion in the final review.

Results: Overall, the most prevalent motives for PDM among university students cover some kind of personal enhancement to the user in terms of performance (in relation to sports, and academic outcomes), mental health (ability sleep, to reduce anxiety), or physical health (manage pre-existing illnesses). Fewer than half of users said that they were involved in PDM for pleasure purposes (to party, to get high, or to experiment).

Conclusion: PDM among students might be viewed as a means of self-improvement when other means of achieving desired objectives are unavailable or restricted. A more thorough understanding of motives for PDM, especially in relation to their influence on behaviour, might help in devising university-based treatment and prevention programmes.

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Introduction

There is a growing body of research on prescription drug misuse (PDM) among university students. Studies have shown that drug misuse prevalence increases at a higher rate among university students than their same age, non-university, peers (Bachman, O'Malley, Johnston, & Freedman, 2008; Bennett, 2014; Johnson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2012). There is also evidence that students might be at particularly high risk of PDM as a result of factors associated with university life, such as academic stress (Eickenhorst, Vitzthum, Klapp, Groneberg, & Mache, 2012).

Understanding the motives for PDM is important as it can help explain why young people in university environments begin or continue PDM. It has been found, for example, that students who believe that PDM is safer than other forms of drug misuse are more likely to use them (Judson & Langdon, 2009). Conversely, students who are aware of the harms of illicit prescription drug use are less likely to use them (Benson, Flory, Humphreys, & Lee, 2015). In addition, research has shown that motives for PDM can predict other forms of substance use behaviour. Students who report illicit use of prescription stimulants to 'get high', for example, are more likely to use cocaine than those who mention 'academic' motives (Teter, McCabe, Cranford, Boyd, & Guthrie, 2005).

PDM is also important because it is associated with a range of harms including: addiction (All-Party Parliamentary Drug Misuse Group, 2009), psychiatric disorders (Spath, Trudeau, Shin, & Redmond, 2008), and poisoning and death (Office for National Statistics, 2015; Giraudon, Lowitz, Dargan, Wood, & Dart, 2013). There is also some evidence that motives for PDM might be associated with alcohol and drug-related problems. A study conducted in the United States (US), for example, found that users who reported motives other than 'to relieve pain' for nonmedical use of prescription opioids had fifteen times the odds of experiencing three or more substance-related problems (e.g. alcohol dependence, inability to stop using drugs, illegal activities, and blackouts) (McCabe, Cranford, Boyd, & Teter, 2007). Hence, motives for PDM are a relevant topic to investigate as they can help understand PDM as well as provide ideas for treatment and prevention.

While research on motives has produced several important findings, there is still much more to be learned. It has been argued, for example, that a large majority of studies to date have been conducted in the United States, with much less known about motives for PDM in other countries (Dennhardt & Murphy, 2013). It has also been noted that studies have focused almost solely on the misuse of prescription stimulants with less attention paid to other medications such as anxiolytics, analgesics, and anti-depressants (Drazdowski, 2016). Further, there have been limited breakdowns of motives by student types beyond differences in gender and (mainly in the United States) student athletes versus non-athletes.

One of the more troubling features of existing research on motives is that the overall findings of the body of knowledge as a whole are hard to decipher. Studies use different methods, they examine a variety of drugs, the motives are phrased in different ways, and the results vary widely. As a result, it is difficult to determine the overall conclusions to be drawn from the research. In order to make sense of this body of knowledge, it is necessary to synthesise the results across studies.

The research literature is replete with reviews on the motives for PDM in that publications on the topic typically include brief reviews of the literature by way of an introduction. However, there have been few systematic reviews that have attempted to summarise the body of research as a whole. We found three dedicated reviews that provided a summary of research on motives for PDM among university students.

Benson et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review of illicit prescription stimulant use among college students covering: prevalence of use, sources of supply, perceived availability, and motives for use. While the title of the study refers to use of a meta-analysis, this method was not used in the investigation of motives. Instead, 15 studies were analysed by identifying the 'most commonly endorsed' motives based on the percentage of students citing them. The most common group of motives was referred to as 'academics' covering: 'to concentrate better while studying', 'to improve study skills', 'to stay awake to study longer' and 'to improve concentration'. Less commonly endorsed motives were summarised under the heading of 'non-academic' reasons and included: 'to get high', to prolong the effects of other substances, and 'to lose weight'.

Dennhardt and Murphy (2013) included one short section on motives for PDM in a review that focused mainly on the findings of research on prevention and treatment of illegal drug use among college students. The method used was to report sections from the conclusions of the individual studies. In this case, there was no synthesis of the findings. The review reported that one study showed that the primary motives for illicit use of prescription pain medication among students were 'to get high' and 'to alleviate pain'. Another found that the most common motives for nonmedical use of prescription stimulants were 'to help concentration' and 'to increase and sustain alertness'. The absence of integration of the results of the studies limits the conclusion that can be drawn from the review.

Drazdowski (2016) conducted a systematic review of motives for PDM among young adults including college-aged students. Thirty-seven articles were selected for inclusion in what the author described as a 'qualitative synthesis'. The review included studies on stimulants, prescription opioids, and CNS depressants. The author summarised the results under the heading of the three main drug types investigated, broken down by whether they were conducted in the United States (US) or elsewhere. The method used for synthesising the results of the studies was first to identify the 'main' motives and then report on other 'common' motives, based on the relative percentage of users reporting the motive. The 'main motive' cited for prescription stimulant use was for 'academic reasons' and a 'common' motive was for 'recreational purposes'. The main motives for non-medical use of prescription opioids and CNS depressants were described as difficult to determine given the limited literature on the topic.

In combination, the three reviews provide a useful overview of the literature. However, the main method of synthesising the results in all cases was a qualitative assessment based on the most common motives. It is not possible from the reviews to provide an overall percentage of users who report particular motives for PDM or to identify a ranked hierarchy of their importance.

The aim of the current paper is to summarise what has been learned from research on the prevalence of motives for PDM

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