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CHARACTERISTICS OF SMOKERS AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SMOKING AT A TEACHING HOSPITAL IN KARACHI

Qidwai W¹ & Zahid N²

ABSTRACT

Objective: To study the characteristics of smokers and their knowledge about smoking, among Family Practice patients, at a teaching hospital in Karachi, Pakistan.

Design: A questionnaire based survey

Settings: Family Practice Center, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Pakistan

Main outcome measures: Age at starting smoking, duration and number of cigarettes smoked, started smoking under influence of friends, colleagues, family members or self motivation, number of friends and colleagues who smoked, whether smoking is unhealthy, and actual chance of harm to an individual due to smoking is very rare or not.

Results: One hundred patients who visited Family Practice Center were interviewed. Sixty one percent were young married men, well educated and either student, in private service, self employed or unemployed. Eighty four (84%) smokers started smoking between 16-25 years of age, and smoked 6-20 cigarettes daily for two to twenty five years. Sixty nine (69%) of them started smoking under the influence of friends and had 3-5 friends and colleagues who smoked. 91% of smokers believed that smoking is unhealthy and were aware that it causes lung cancer and heart disease. Majority of them (69%) believed that the actual harm of smoking to an individual is not very rare.

Conclusion: We have documented the characteristics of smokers and their knowledge about smoking among Family Practice patients. Majority of the respondents started smoking at a young age under the influence of friends though they were aware of its harmful effects. Though the sample size is small but it does give an indication about the responsible factors to plan interventional preventive strategies

KEY WORDS: Smoking, Knowledge, Health, Prevention

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INTRODUCTION

Smoking related diseases are the leading cause of mortality in the developed world¹ and an important cause for premature death^{2,3}. Smoking has increased dramatically during the twentieth century in the developed countries and is still increasing in under-developed countries⁴. Smoking is common in Pakistan and there is no clear policy on tobacco control⁵.

There have been calls for mass health education

and enforcement of the ban on smoking in public places, in order to reduce the number of smokers. Studies have emphasized the importance to educate physicians and the general public about the cardiac and carcinogenic effects of smoking⁶.

Over the past few decades, not much change has been seen in the frequency of smoking in Pakistan⁷. There is a need to implement prevention strategies, to discourage people to start smoking. It is also important to study factors under which people start smoking, the level of knowledge of smokers with regard to smoking and its adverse effects on health. Public health education programs through mass media can help devise strategies to prevent people from smoking. This study was conducted to know the knowledge about smoking, among Family Practice patients.

PATIENTS AND METHOD

A questionnaire was developed keeping in view the study objectives. It included the demographic profile of the respondents. It was administered to Family Practice patients, at Aga Khan University Hospital, which is a tertiary level teaching hospital in Karachi.

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About hundred and fifty patients are seen daily at the facility, by twelve Family Physicians.

It was a cross sectional survey and the questionnaire was administered by the investigators of the study. Only current smokers were included in the survey. Written consent was taken from those participating in the study, after providing them assurance on confidentiality. SPSS computer software was used for the data management.

RESULTS

We interviewed hundred Family Practice patients who smoked. The majority were young married men (61%), well educated, and either student, in private service, self employed or unemployed (Table-I).

Eighty four (84%) started smoking between 16-25 years of age, and smoked 6-20 cigarettes daily for the previous 2-25 years. Sixty nine (69%) started smoking under the influence of friends and had 3-5 friends and colleagues who smoked (Table-II).

Majority of the smokers (91%) believed that smoking is unhealthy and were aware that it causes lung cancer and heart disease, while 69% believed that the actual harm of smoking to an individual is not very rare (Table-III).

DISCUSSION

We have documented the characteristics of smokers and their knowledge about smoking, among Family Practice patients, visiting a teaching facility in Karachi. This survey and the findings can help us to understand factors responsible to start smoking. The information on the level of knowledge that smokers

Table-I: Demographic profile of the patients (n=100)

| Parameter | Number (Percent) |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| SEX: | |
| Males | 94(94) |
| Females | 06(06) |
| Mean age in years (SD)* | 37.4(15.54) |
| Marital Status: | |
| Married | 61(61) |
| Single | 39(39) |
| Educational Status: | |
| Grade X and below | 05(05) |
| Grade XII | 23(23) |
| Diploma | 02(02) |
| Graduate | 53(53) |
| Post-graduate | 17(17) |
| Occupation: | |
| Private service | 20(20) |
| Government service | 17(17) |
| Self employed | 20(20) |
| Unemployed | 15(15) |
| Student | 24(24) |
| Housewife | 04(04) |

* Standard deviation

have about smoking will help us to devise interventional strategies to promote smoking cessation.

Our study population was more educated and better placed socio-economically than the rest of the population and consisted primarily of males. The study however has a weakness of small sample size, hence we cannot generalize its findings of our study to the rest of the population.

Table-II: Main Characteristics of Smokers (n=100)

| Characteristics | Number (Percent) |
|--|------------------|
| Duration of smoking | |
| < 1 year | 03(03) |
| 2-5 years | 25(25) |
| 6-10 years | 18(18) |
| 11-25 years | 27(27) |
| 26-40 years | 21(21) |
| >41 years | 06(06) |
| Number of cigarettes smoked daily | |
| <5 | 45(45) |
| 6-20 | 52(52) |
| 21-40 | 03(03) |
| >41 | 00(00) |
| Age at starting smoking(in years) | |
| <15 | 12(12) |
| 16-25 | 84(84) |
| 26-40 | 04(04) |
| Started smoking under the influence of | |
| Friends | 69(69) |
| Colleagues | 01(01) |
| Family members | 01(01) |
| Self motivation | 29(29) |
| Number of friends and colleagues who smoke | |
| None | 12 |
| 1-2 | 24 |
| 3-5 | 48 |
| >6 | 16 |

Table-III: Knowledge of smokers about smoking (n=100)

| Knowledge | Number (Percent) |
|---|------------------|
| Smoking is unhealthy | |
| Yes | 91 |
| No | 09 |
| Adverse consequences of smoking on health | |
| Lung Cancer | 86(35.1) |
| Cough | 30(12.3) |
| Throat cancer | 02(0.9) |
| Weight loss | 06(2.5) |
| Heart disease | 49(20) |
| Breathing problems | 36(14.6) |
| Tuberculosis | 09(3.6) |
| Reduced appetite | 17(7.0) |
| Stomach cancer | 10(4.0) |
| | (responses=245) |
| Smoking is harmful but actual chances of harm in individual case is very rare | |
| Yes | 31(31) |
| No | 69(69) |

A significantly higher prevalence of smoking among men in comparison to women has been reported earlier from Pakistan⁵. It would be interesting to find out the underlying factors why men smoke more than women. This information may help us better understand factors contributing to the smoking habit. There is evidence to suggest that male identity and socialization are key influences determining smoking behavior among Pakistani population⁸, however such assumptions need to be studied in more detail.

The sample population started smoking at the age of 16-25 years, which is similar to earlier reports⁹. There is a need for prevention strategies to stop adolescents and young adults from starting to smoke at this vulnerable age. There is evidence to suggest that strong media influences perceptions about smoking among young people¹⁰, outlining a need for a vigorous campaign to counter it.

Majority of the respondents (54%) smoked for more than 10 years. It shows that those who get addicted to smoking are likely to continue the habit for an extended period of time. This again highlights the need to focus on programs that prevent young people from starting to smoke.

It is interesting to note that 52% of the respondents smoked between 6-20 cigarettes daily. This shows the level of addiction to tobacco which is a barrier to smoking cessation. It is known that those who start to smoke early in life, smoke heavily and find it difficult to quit¹¹. Such combination of events seem to exist among our study population. Friends are the most important factor and under their influence majority of respondents started to smoke.

Almost half of the respondents had 3-5 colleagues who smoked. This could be a factor responsible for continuation of smoking among them. The adverse influence of friends who smoke, on the smoking behavior of a person is well reported¹². It may possibly be the reason that one finds it difficult to quit smoking. An approach that targets smokers as a group, including friends and colleagues who smoke, may yield better results with regard to smoking cessation.

The great majority of the respondents knew that smoking is unhealthy and yet they continue to smoke. Hence, it is important to find out why this is so and exploit this belief to make them quit smoking. It is encouraging to note that the majority of the respondents are aware of injurious effects of smoking, including cancer and heart disease. This belief can again be exploited to motivate them to quit smoking.

The risk for developing or dying from cardiovascular disease¹³ and cancers^{14,15} is high among smokers. It is a common belief that smokers feel the chances of

harm to them in real life from smoking is very rare, but it is interesting to see that the view of the majority of the respondents in our study is contrary to this belief. This is yet another factor which can be exploited to motivate them to quit smoking.

CONCLUSION

Majority of the patients attending Family Practice Center started smoking at a young age under influence of friends despite the fact that they were aware of its harmful effects. The study limitation includes its small sample size but it does give an idea to plan preventive strategies to discourage smoking.

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