

Psychoactive substances: consumption among workers from the mobile urgency care system

Substâncias psicoativas: consumo pelos trabalhadores de saúde do sistema de atendimento móvel de urgência

Substancias psicoactivas: consumo entre trabajadores de salud del sistema de atención móvil de urgencias

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Abstract

Objective: To evaluate the consumption of psychoactive substances by health workers from the Mobile Urgency Care Service. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study conducted at a Public Health service located in a city in Piauí. Data collection took place from January to March 2019 by applying the following instruments in personal interviews: one with occupational, sociodemographic and economic characteristics; and the *Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test* (ASSIST). The data were organized and processed in the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) software (version 19.0). **Results:** Of the 68 health professionals, 42 were male, with a mean age of 49.8 years old. Among them, 44 were married and 48 were Catholics. The most prevalent professional category was Nursing Technician, accounting for 46.2%. Among these workers, alcohol was the most used psychoactive substance (54 professionals), followed by tobacco consumption (25) and hypnotics (8). It is noted that tobacco was the substance most commonly used on a daily basis. **Conclusion:** Consumption of psychoactive substances among health professionals was evident and can be related to the pressure resulting from these positions. Attention is drawn to the importance of expanding this debate and addressing health workers' mental health.

Descriptors: Alcoholic Beverages; Illicit Drugs; Health Personnel; Emergency Medical Services.

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What is already known on this?

There are no conclusive data on the consumption of psychoactive substances among SAMU workers, but drug use can negatively affect performance and pose risks both to patients and to professionals.

What this study adds?

The article indicates the frequency and consumption of psychoactive substances among health workers and emphasizes the importance of discussing the professionals' mental health.



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Resumo

Objetivo: Avaliar o consumo de substâncias psicoativas por trabalhadores de saúde do Serviço de Atendimento Móvel de Urgência. **Métodos:** Estudo transversal realizado em um serviço público de saúde localizado numa cidade do Piauí. A coleta de dados se deu de janeiro a março de 2019 por meio da aplicação dos instrumentos em entrevistas pessoais, um com características ocupacionais, sociodemográficas e econômicas e o Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST). Os dados foram organizados e processados no software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (versão 19.0). **Resultados:** Dos 68 profissionais de saúde, 42 eram do sexo masculino, com média de idade de 49,8 anos. Destes, 44 eram casados e 48 católicos. A categoria profissional mais presente foi a de técnicos de enfermagem (46,2%). Dentre estes trabalhadores, o álcool foi a substância psicoativa mais utilizada por 54 profissionais, seguido pelo consumo de tabaco por 25 e de hipnóticos por 8. Destaca-se que o tabaco foi a substância mais utilizada diariamente. **Conclusão:** O consumo de substâncias psicoativas entre profissionais da saúde mostrou-se presente e pode estar relacionado com a pressão proveniente desses cargos. Chama-se atenção para a importância de ampliar esse debate e discutir a saúde mental de trabalhadores da saúde.

Descritores: Bebidas Alcoólicas; Drogas Ilícitas; Pessoal de Saúde; Serviços Médicos de Emergência.

Resumen

Objetivo: Evaluar el consumo de sustancias psicoactivas en trabajadores de salud del Servicio de Atención Móvil de Urgencias. **Métodos:** Estudio transversal realizado en un servicio público de salud situado en una ciudad de Piauí. Los datos se recolectaron entre enero y marzo de 2019 aplicando los siguientes instrumentos en entrevistas personales: uno con características ocupacionales, sociodemográficas y económicas; y el Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST). Los datos se organizaron y procesaron en el programa de software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (versión 19.0). **Resultados:** De los 68 profesionales de salud, 42 eran del sexo masculino, con una media de edad de 49,8 años. De ellos, 44 estaban casados y 48 eran católicos. La categoría profesional más frecuente fue la de Técnicos de Enfermería (46,2%). Entre estos trabajadores, el alcohol fue la sustancia psicoactiva más consumida (54 profesionales), seguida por consumo de tabaco (25) y de hipnóticos (8). Se destaca que el tabaco fue la sustancia más utilizada en forma diaria. **Conclusión:** El consumo de sustancias psicoactivas entre profesionales de salud demostró ser una realidad y puede estar relacionado con la presión que generan estos puestos de trabajo. La atención debe centrarse en la importancia de ampliar este debate y analizar la salud mental de los trabajadores de salud.

Descriptor: Bebidas Alcohólicas; Drogas Ilícitas; Personal de Salud; Servicios Médicos de Emergencias.

INTRODUCTION

Consumption of psychoactive substances (PAS) is a serious global health problem that has increased considerably, especially in developing countries. In Brazil, it is estimated that 9.1 liters of pure alcohol were consumed per person aged at least 15 years old in 2015, evidencing that alcohol consumption is widespread among individuals from different age groups, schooling levels, genders and economic classes. This phenomenon generates harms to people's quality of life, potentially leading to chemical dependence and/or development of mental disorders, with depression as the primary concern.⁽¹⁻²⁾

In this context, poor working conditions, coupled with exposure to stressful situations, can contribute to workers' vulnerability in seeking and consequently consuming psychoactive substances (PAS). Thus, such attitudes enable negative consequences for workers, as they increase the risk of developing health problems, whether physical, psychological and/or social.⁽³⁻⁵⁾

Among health workers, special attention should be given to those active in the Mobile Emergency Care Service (*Serviço de Atendimento Móvel de Urgência*, SAMU). Legally established by Ordinance No. 2048/GM of November 5th, 2002, SAMU is part of the Urgency and Emergency Network (*Rede de Urgência e Emergência*, RUE) and of the Psychosocial Care Network (*Rede de Atenção Psicossocial*, RAPS). This service operates 24 hours a day and requires self-control, agility and technical competence, as it constitutes one of the first contact points for patients with the health system.⁽⁶⁻¹⁰⁾

Although these professionals are aware of the risks associated with psychoactive substance use, they are not exempt from being part of the population that consumes alcohol and other drugs. Among the determining factors that motivate such consumption, the following stand out: problems related to personal life; and situations related to the work environment, such as lack of supplies, wage devaluation, lack of support and recognition from the institution, excessive workload, and unfavorable conditions for performing their activities, in addition to stress, which can manifest through professional conflicts. In light of this, the pursuit of psychoactive substances becomes an attempt to avoid the tensions arising from work.⁽¹¹⁻¹⁴⁾

A study conducted in Public Health services from Portugal and Brazil⁽¹⁵⁾ revealed health professionals' dissatisfaction with the scenario they have to face, linking this dissatisfaction both to the structural level and to coping with the unpredictability of situations. Additionally, it pointed out the family distress witnessed during rescues and inferred that workers in emergency or urgency Public Health services constitute a vulnerable group for the consumption of legal and/or illegal drugs. This fact is directly related with the quality of the assistance provided.⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾

Thus, the negative impact on the personal and professional life of health workers who use psychoactive substances is evident. This is justified by the increase in the presenteeism and absenteeism rates and the rise in the number of retirement requests due to incapacity and disability. In addition to that, it makes the relationship between professionals and patients or other multidisciplinary team members conflictive.⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁷⁾

Given the lack of studies directly addressing the use of psychoactive substances (PAS) by SAMU health workers and their frequent exposure to conditions recognized as facilitators for consuming these substances, it becomes fundamental to develop studies in this area. Therefore, this study aimed at assessing the consumption of psychoactive substances by SAMU health workers.

METHODS

This is a cross-sectional, population-based, observational, descriptive and analytical study aimed at evaluating the consumption of psychoactive substances (PAS) among SAMU health workers from a public service located in the Northeast of Brazil. SAMU functions as an organizing and guiding element for pre-hospital care, bridging the gap with the hospital level, and can be activated by the population. During this period, the team consisted of 207 health workers.

Data collection took place between January and March 2019. The following inclusion criteria were considered: permanent employees with service time equal to or greater than one year and weekly hour load equal to or greater than 24 hours. Those who were on leave from their work, either due to vacation or other types of leave during the data collection period, were excluded. In this way, 35 professionals were excluded from the interviews. Therefore, 172 professionals were included in the study. However, due to the emergency and unpredictable nature of their work, some professionals were unavailable to answer the instrument. Consequently, the data presented pertain to 68 workers.

Two instruments were used: *Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test* (ASSIST) and a questionnaire developed by the researchers covering the occupational conditions and sociodemographic aspects. ASSIST is an instrument consisting of 8 questions that assesses a person's involvement with alcohol, tobacco and other psychoactive substances (PAS), identifying their use level or problems associated with this consumption. Thus, the variables analyzed included behavior, frequency and determinants for PAS consumption.

With the intention of identifying the study population sociodemographic profile, data were collected on gender, age, marital status, religion, schooling and professional work category. As for the working conditions, diverse information was collected on employment time in the institution, work shift, weekly hour load, time working in the sector, work schedule, existence of other employment contracts, and total weekly hour load, including all jobs. Referring to the self-reported health conditions, the data analyzed included presence of chronic diseases, self-assessment of their own health status, self-assessment of their health status before undertaking the current job, and attributing health status to the working conditions. In reference to PAS consumption, information was collected on influencing factors for their consumption, the main PAS consumption situation, and attributing health status to their use.

The data were organized in the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) software (version 19.0). In order to analyze and verify normality of the sample, the *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* test was performed. To assess the association between the qualitative variables, Pearson's Chi-square test was used. Subsequently, Pearson's correlation was employed to analyze the quantitative variables. All analyses were conducted at a 5% ($p < 0.05$) significance level.

This research is a clipping from the macro-project entitled "Consumption of Psychoactive Substances by Health Workers", approved on November 13th, 2017 by the Committee of Ethics in Research (*Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa*, CEP) with Human Beings of *Universidade Federal do Piauí*, under opinion number 2,379,798.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic and occupational data corresponding to the study sample. It was observed that most of the health workers included in this study were male (61.8%), with a mean age of 49.8 years old, married (64.7%), and professing the Catholic religion (71.6%). In relation to schooling, there is prevalence of technical level (29.9%).

Table 1. Characterization of the sociodemographic profile corresponding to the SAMU health workers. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2019. (N=68)

	Variables	N	%	Mean ± SD
Gender	Male	42	61.8	
	Female	26	38.2	
Age				49.8 ± 10.5
Marital status	Married	44	64.7	
	Single	05	7.3	
	Divorced	11	16.2	
	Stable union	04	5.9	
	Widowed	04	5.9	
Religion*	Catholic	48	70.6	
	Spiritist	04	5.9	
	Evangelical	14	20.5	
	Agnostic	01	1.5	
	Spiritualist	01	1.5	
Schooling*	Technical Level	20	29.4	
	Higher Education	17	25.0	
	Complete High School	08	11.8	
	Incomplete Higher Education	04	5.9	
	Master's degree	03	4.4	
	Emergency and Urgency Training	03	4.4	
	Others	13	19.1	
Total		68	100	

Source: Direct research, 2019.

Regarding the occupational aspects, the Nursing Technician category was the most prevalent in Table 2 (45.6%). It was also observed that 65.7% had working times in the institution of more than 8 years, 48.5% worked the day shift, and 93.8% reported having another employment contract. As for the service hour load, the same prevalence for 24 hours and 30 hours (27.7%) stands out. Likewise, the 12/36 and 12/24 schedules were reported by 4.5% of the sample.

Table 2. Characterization of the occupational profile corresponding to the SAMU health workers. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2019. (N=68)

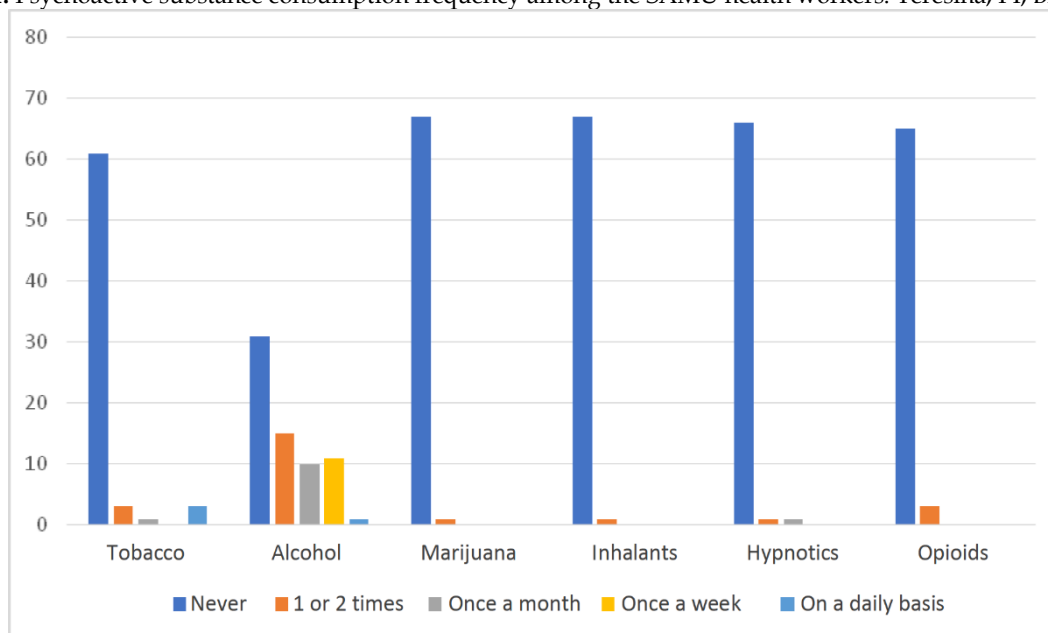
	Variables	N	%
Professional category	Nurse	11	16.2
	Nursing Technician	31	45.6
	Physician	01	1.5
	Driver	18	26.5
	Intensivist	02	2.9
	Gynecologist	03	4.4
	Others	02	2.9
Time working in the institution	1 - 2 years	03	4.4
	3 - 4 years	01	1.5
	5 - 6 years	13	19.1
	7 - 8 years	07	10.3
	>8 years	44	64.7
Work shift	Day	33	48.5
	Night	14	20.6
	Day and night	21	30.9

Hour load in this service	24 hours	18	26.5
	30 hours	18	26.5
	36 hours	16	23.5
	40 hours	07	10.3
	>40 hours	09	13.2
Work schedule	12/36 hours	03	4.4
	12/24 hours	03	4.4
	24/24 hours	02	2.9
	24/48 hours	13	19.1
	Other	47	69.2
Has another employment contract	Yes	60	88.2
	No	08	11.8
Total		68	100

Source: Direct research, 2019.

Graph 1 addresses the PAS consumption frequency among the study participants. Alcohol is the most used psychoactive substance among the SAMU health workers, used by 54 (79.4%) participants, followed by tobacco consumption with 25 professionals (36.8%), and hypnotics with 8 (11.8%). It is noted that tobacco was the substance most commonly used daily. Of the 25 professionals who use it, 3 consume tobacco every day. In relation to weekly, monthly and once or twice a month consumption, alcohol had the highest frequency of affirmative answers, with 11, 10 and 15 responses, respectively.

Graph 1. Psychoactive substance consumption frequency among the SAMU health workers. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2019.



Source: Direct research, 2019.

When analyzing Table 3, it was observed that there was no statistically significant association between the variables related to the labor aspects and the risk of dependence related to alcohol use.

Table 3. Association between the risk of dependence related to alcohol use and the labor aspects among the SAMU health workers. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2019.

Variables	Low risk	Moderate risk	High risk	p-value*
Schooling				0.682
Technical Level	14 (70.0)	05 (25.0)	01 (5.0)	
Higher Education	14 (82.4)	02 (11.8)	01 (5.9)	

Complete High School	06 (75.0)	01 (12.5)	01 (12.5)	
Incomplete Higher Education	02 (50.0)	01 (25.0)	01 (25.0)	
Master's Degree	03 (100)	-	-	
Emergency and Urgency Training	01 (50.0)	01 (50.0)	-	
Others	12 (92.3)	01 (7.7)	-	
Professional category				0.872
Nurse	08 (72.7)	03 (27.3)	-	
Nursing Technician	24 (77.4)	06 (16.1)	02 (6.5)	
Physician	01 (100)	-	-	
Driver	13 (72.2)	03 (16.7)	02 (11.1)	
Intensivist	02 (100)	-	-	
Gynecologist	03 (100)	-	-	
Others	02 (100)	-	-	
Time working in the institution				0.647
1 - 2 years	01 (66.7)	-	01 (33.3)	
3 - 4 years	01 (100)	-	-	
5 - 6 years	10 (76.9)	03 (23.1)	-	
7 - 8 years	05 (83.3)	01 (16.7)	-	
>8 years	34 (77.3)	11 (16.4)	06 (6.0)	
Work shift				0.290
Day	23 (69.7)	07 (21.2)	01 (9.1)	
Night	12 (8.7)	01 (7.1)	01 (7.1)	
Day and night	18(85.7)	11 (16.2)	04 (5.9)	
Hour load in this service				0.173
24 hours	16 (88.9)	02 (11.1)	-	
30 hours	16 (88.9)	01 (11.1)	-	
36 hours	10 (66.7)	02 (13.3)	03 (20.0)	
40 hours	03 (60.7)	02 (22.2)	01 (11.1)	
>40 hours				
Work schedule				0.406
12/36 hours	02 (66.7)	-	01 (33.3)	
12/24 hours	02 (66.7)	-	01 (33.3)	
24/24 hours	01 (100)	-	-	
24/48 hours	09 (69.2)	02 (23.1)	01 (7.7)	
Other	38 (77.6)	11 (16.4)	04 (6.0)	
Another employment contract				0.330
Yes	4 (75.0)	11 (18.3)	04 (6.7)	
No	04 (100)	-	-	

*Likelihood ratio.

Source: Direct research, 2019.

DISCUSSION

In relation to the sociodemographic data found in this study, it was noticed that the health professionals working in the service are predominantly men. This can be justified due to the intense physical effort in activities such as transporting devices and patients. This finding has been frequently pointed out in the literature and suggests a possible trend for men to be allocated in pre-hospital urgency care.⁽¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁾

However, another research study indicates that the female gender accounts for greater presence in this type of service, evidencing greater emphasis on physical preparedness than on gender, as gender does not determine the ability to develop the activities proposed by the profession but, rather, lack of physical preparation and fitness, which can compromise performance in both genders.⁽²⁰⁻²¹⁾

This study presented a mean age of 49.8 years old, differing from the mean age range of the professionals working in pre-hospital care found in another study, where the variation was from 28 to 48 years old. The current study also showed that the most prevalent professional category was Nursing Technician (45.6%). This relation is justified due to the characteristics of this emergency care service, given by the predominance of Basic Life Support ambulances, with a team comprised ambulance driver and nursing technician.^(19,22)

Religion is related to alcohol consumption, as its growth in an environment without religious worship motivates people, increasing the chances of consuming this substance. Only one of the professionals interviewed reported not professing any religion and 44 stated being Catholics, whereas the vast majority of the sample asserted having never used any psychoactive substances (PAS). However, other factors related to belief, such as current religion and frequency in practicing religious activities, can be associated with drug use. Thus, it was noticed that religious affiliation constitutes one of the predominant reasons for health professionals never having drunk alcohol in their lives or having ceased such practice.⁽²³⁻²⁵⁾

Predominance of service times over eight years in the same institution was observed. Similar information was found in another study conducted with Brazilian health professionals working at a public institution providing urgency care in the state of Maranhão, presenting a mean working time in the institution of between 5 and 10 years. The longer the professionals' service time, the higher the exposure to the risk of developing some musculoskeletal disorder due to patient handling and weight overload. In addition to that, most of the participants asserted having another job. However, accumulation of jobs aimed at improving financial situations, coupled with studying and seeking professional qualification, can trigger fatigue in younger professionals.^(8,20-22,26)

It was identified that alcohol was the most used psychoactive substance among the SAMU health workers included in this study, followed by consumption of tobacco and hypnotics. Similar results were found in a cross-sectional study conducted with 49 Nursing workers from hospital and primary care areas in a municipality from the Brazilian Southern region. It was identified that alcohol was the most used substance by the study participants (75.51%), followed by tobacco consumption (40.82%).⁽¹⁴⁾

Although it was the most used substance, many professionals still feel ashamed to reveal this information. This is because they adopt a behavior different from what is expected by society, in addition to the fear of being fired or facing disciplinary measures.⁽²⁷⁾

It is worth noting that alcohol consumption is not exclusively related to work, considering the historical-cultural factor that strongly associates it with socialization and recreation, in addition to its unrestricted commercialization and availability. However, the connection established between the professionals and work contributes to increased consumption, as this substance is perceived as a quick and effective means of reducing stress, producing physical and mental relaxation.⁽²⁸⁾

In relation to tobacco use, the results of this research were higher than those of another study conducted with health professionals from a teaching hospital located in Iraq, where use of this substance was reported by 26.5% of the participants, predominantly among those with more time working in the institution. It is assumed that stressful conditions and professional environment conditions such as night work, as well as other employment relationships, influence this consumption.⁽²⁹⁾

Health workers, especially physicians and nurses, are the most susceptible to using and developing dependence on some PAS (sedatives, for example), considering the greater self-administration possibility, as they have free access to them in their work environment and are responsible for their storage and control.⁽³⁰⁻³¹⁾

Alcohol combined with tobacco are the most consumed psychoactive substances in Brazil and are responsible for the highest rates of problems resulting from misuse. This is due to the alcohol and tobacco integration into Brazilian society, socio-culturally accepted by the population, a fact linked to legalization of these drugs in terms of production, use and commercialization, as well as encouraged by some communities.^(30,32)

The fact that the alcohol and tobacco consumption frequency by these health professionals was high renders the performance of health educators' role concerning, as these workers' neglect of their own health leads them to the contradiction of guiding others about something but not following the guidelines themselves, which is a weak discourse in terms of persuasion to induce clients to build their own desire to promote health.⁽³³⁾

With regard to the hour load, 24- and 30-hour shifts predominated. It is observed that health workers spend extensive hours in the work environment and, thus, it is fundamental that the workplace provides favorable conditions for the development of work activities. This is because unhealthy work environments and lack of appropriate rest areas, as well as excessive and exhausting working hours, predispose professionals to constant presence of stress, oftentimes leading to PAS use by these workers.^(14,30,34-35)

The study limitations manifested themselves during data collection, as some participants refused to sign the Informed Consent Form. To overcome this situation, a box was made so that the participants could deposit the collection instruments duly answered.

The contributions brought about by this study can be valuable since, by identifying the problem of PAS use in health workers, it emphasizes the need to plan health actions and policies for prevention, detection, treatment and rehabilitation aimed at this population group, in order to prevent or minimize involvement and harmful use of these substances that are responsible for serious impairments to health, life and work.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above, it was evident that PAS consumption among health professionals is a problem already reported by several other studies, and that its relationship with the pressure from these job positions was well-established in previous studies. Use of these substances can exert impacts on the performance of their activities of daily living and on proper development of their functions. However, the opposite also occurs. The occupational environment, excessive work, and physical and mental stress can lead to substance use as a means to relieve stress and even to increase productivity.

Attention is drawn to the importance of expanding the debate on the theme and discussing health workers' mental health. Finally, it is hoped that this survey will stimulate conducting new scientific research studies with greater geographical scopes, in order to assess the problem in other national and/or international settings.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Conception or design of the study: Fernandes MA. Data collection: Mesquita MKR, Moura DMO, PAULA JSF, SILVA AS. Data analysis and interpretation: Fernandes MA, Mesquita MKR, Moura DMO, PAULA JSF, SILVA AS, Carvalho RJ, Pillon SC. Writing of the article or critical review: Fernandes MA, Mesquita MKR, Moura DMO, PAULA JSF, SILVA AS, Carvalho RJ, Pillon SC. Final approval of the version to be published: Fernandes MA.

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