Periodic Survey #31

Opinions on the Legal Status of Drugs for Adults

Periodic Survey #31 was initiated by the Committee on Substance Abuse (COSA) to explore pediatricians’ current practices and attitudes toward drug screening of adolescent patients. PS#33 was an eight-page self-administered questionnaire sent to a random sample of 1,636 active FAAPs. The original and four follow-up mailings were conducted from July to November 1995. We received a total of 1,099 completed questionnaires for a response of 67.2%.

In general, pediatricians think the legal status of most drugs should remain as they are now. The majority of pediatricians think the possession or sale of heroin, cocaine and psychedelic drugs should remain a felony, while tobacco and alcohol should remain legal, subject to current regulation. However, there is no consensus of opinion on the legal status of marijuana.

- More than two-thirds of pediatricians think the possession, sale or distribution of LSD and other psychedelic drugs, heroin, and cocaine should remain a felony (73%, 76% and 66%, respectively).
- More than one-half of pediatricians (55%) think amphetamines should be available by prescription, while nearly one-third (32%) think possession or sale should be a felony.
- The majority of pediatricians (81%) think tranquilizers such as valium should be available only by prescription.
- Most pediatricians think the sale, distribution, and possession of alcohol and tobacco should remain legal and subject to regulations that control their possession and sale (82%, 74%, respectively).
- Pediatricians’ opinion on the legal status of marijuana varies. Nearly one-third (31%) think marijuana should be legal for medical purposes (by prescription only). Twenty-six percent of pediatricians think the legal status of marijuana should remain a felony. About one-fourth of pediatricians (24%) think the sale and distribution of marijuana should remain illegal, but the penalty for personal possession should be a misdemeanor or citation, or eliminated altogether. Nearly one in five pediatricians (18%) think the sale, distribution, and possession of marijuana should be legal, subject to regulations.

When responses are examined by age and gender, pediatricians remain very divided on their views toward marijuana. However, older and male pediatricians appear to favor decriminalization or prescription only status for marijuana, whereas younger and female pediatricians tend to favor prescription only or felony status. There are no other differences in pediatricians’ opinions on the legal status of drugs by practice location, setting or subspecialty area.

Effects of Legalizing Drugs
74% of pediatricians agree that more studies on the effects of legalizing various drugs should be undertaken before decisions are made to legalize those drugs.

VI. Summary, continued

61% of pediatricians believe legalization of drugs will increase the overall number of drug users; 22% disagree.

54% of pediatricians do not think the legalization of drugs will diminish violence associated with drug use; 30% think it will.

65% of pediatricians do not think the legalization of drugs will alleviate crime, violence, and other problems associated with inner city youth; 19% think it will.

More than one-half of pediatricians (54%) think decriminalization of drug laws will increase drug usage; 24% disagree and 22% are unsure.

Pediatricians are divided on whether banning tobacco will eliminate or postpone its initial use by adolescents (44% agree; 40% disagree).

EFFECTIVENESS OF SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION METHODS

Pediatricians agree by far that the most effective method of preventing or reducing alcohol and drug use among adolescents is family communications and interactions (93% so reported). Social and resistance skill training was also recognized as an effective method by 86% of pediatricians. Nearly three-fourths of pediatricians (72%) think legal measures directed at drug suppliers and distributors will prevent/reduce substance use among adolescents; 68% think educational programs such as "DARE" are effective. Pediatricians are divided on whether "zero tolerance" laws that punish drug users regardless of the amount or type of drug used are an effective deterrence for adolescent substance use: 42% think such laws are effective and 32% do not, while 26% are unsure.

OPINION ON DRUG PREVENTION/TREATMENT POLICIES

Most pediatricians (77%) agree or strongly agree the primary focus of US drug policy and drug enforcement laws should be the reduction of drug use through prevention education and treatment programs; however, less than one-fourth (22%) think outpatient substance abuse treatment programs are effective in eliminating individual drug use.

OPINION ON HARM REDUCTION DRUG POLICIES

Most pediatricians (60%) do not think drug policies that focus on reducing harm to individual users (such as needle exchange programs, safe-use educational campaigns, and methadone maintenance) will increase total drug use, while nearly one-fourth (24%) are unsure. Almost one-half of pediatricians (46%) do not think a focus on policies that reduce harm to individual users would send citizens the wrong message about drug use; 29% think it might. However, few pediatricians (25%) think such harm reduction policies should be the primary focus of US drug policy/drug enforcement laws.

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