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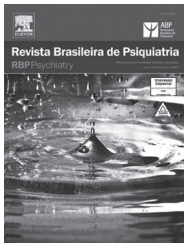

Letter to the Editors

Alcohol and other drug use by Brazilian truck drivers: a cause for concern?

Uso de álcool e outras drogas por motoristas brasileiros de caminhão: um motivo de preocupação?

Dear Editors,

Road traffic injuries remain an important public health issue worldwide. More than 1.2 million people die each year due to road fatalities, and 20 to 50 million are estimated to be injured. Moreover, this health burden with epidemic proportions can be considered an increasing problem, particularly in developing countries.[1]

Alcohol and other drug use is one of the main contributors to the occurrence of traffic accidents. In Brazil, the road traffic fatality rate is 18.3 per 100,000 inhabitants[1] (the second major cause of death by injuries), and generates an economic loss of approximately US$13 billion annually.[2]

Among motor vehicles, trucks are the second most prevalent in terms of total accidents and related costs.[2] In this scenario, alcohol and other drug use among truck drivers are a special cause of concern. In a truck driver survey conducted in Brazil, 9.6% reported having drank alcoholic beverages on the day of the interview, with 4.9% of them presenting a positive blood-alcohol concentration (BAC).[3] In another study in which truck drivers provided urine samples for toxicological analysis, 9.3% had used illicit drugs, with 61.9% presenting positive results for amphetamines, 23.8% for cocaine, and 11.9% for cannabis.[4]

Remarkably, it has been reported that alcohol and other drugs have been purposefully used as a means to overcome the life stressors that truck drivers routinely face (e.g., long working days, few sleeping hours, shift work, psychological pressure to meet deadlines, and being away from home); however, these substances are used in such a way that the occupational activity becomes dangerous, with potential negative consequences to the Brazilian public health, judiciary, and social security systems, in addition to society as a whole.

Taking into account that road traffic accidents are considered a preventable cause of death, alcohol and other drug use by drivers should be treated as a high priority health issue in Brazil. Therefore, the authors strongly suggest that further research on this topic should be supported in order to estimate the prevalence of these professionals who drive under the influence of alcohol and other drugs. Also, transportation companies should implement a drug-free workplace program, which includes substance-abuse detection, prevention, and employee education to reduce the health burden due to drug use by truck drivers. Moreover, the establishment of policies to discourage driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs in the general population should also be addressed in order to change the current situation.

In Brazil, the Law #11.705 (implemented in June 2008), which reduced the BAC limit for drivers to 0,2 g/L, has shown positive results regarding the decrease of road traffic fatalities and injuries in Sao Paulo.[5] Although this enactment was considered effective in reducing traffic accidents, authors believe that legislators must review and update this law, as it does not provide a proper definition about the main prohibited drugs and the specific penalties related to their consumption while driving. Finally, in order to achieve the expected results, it is also essential that authorities exert efforts to improve law enforcement on traffic safety.

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