Intervene Early to Prevent Teen Substance Abuse

BY BRUCE JANCIN
Denver Bureau

ASPEN, COLO. — Surveys consistently show that 90% of all youths have experimented with drugs and alcohol by the time they finish high school. Yet only a minority develop substance abuse problems, Paula D. Riggs, M.D., said at a psychiatry conference sponsored by the University of Colorado.

Convergent evidence from multiple genetic studies and longitudinal behavioral studies shows that children who develop adolescent substance use disorder can often be identified as early as preschool, he said.

The developmental trajectory that leads to adolescent substance use disorder begins in early childhood. Youngsters in substance abuse treatment programs are more likely than are their non–drug-abusing peers to have displayed a particular constellation of temperament traits as toddlers and preschoolers. This constellation consists of aggressiveness, impulsivity, poor attentiveness and persistence, and difficulty in regulating affect and behavior.

These aspects of temperament are quite heritable. In addition, the home life of affected children is often characterized by conflict and poor parental monitoring.

Without intervention, children with this pattern of difficult temperament often develop oppositional defiant disorder, learning disabilities, conduct disorder, and/or attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder by the time they enter school. They often are unsuccessful in school and may be placed in special education classes where they associate with a deviant peer group, becoming deficient in social skills and coping strategies. Eventually they turn to drugs and alcohol as their coping strategy.

If primary care physicians were to identify preschoolers with the red-flag characteristic temperament constellation and refer them for a comprehensive psychologic assessment and evaluation, it could have a huge impact on the problem of teen substance abuse down the road. "We have early interventions that help reduce the risk of later problems," Dr. Riggs said at the conference, which was also sponsored by the Colorado Psychiatric Society and the Denver Institute for Psychoanalysis. ■

Parents Want to Discuss Family Alcohol History

WASHINGTON— A majority of parents in rural Kansas think children should know about problem drinkers in the family, reported Kimber Richter, Ph.D.

Approximately 45% of alcoholism is genetic, and knowledge of family history might help children make better choices about alcohol consumption, said Dr. Richter at the annual conference of the Association for Medical and Education in Research and Substance Abuse.

Dr. Richter and a group of medical students surveyed parents to better understand parent-child communication regarding a family history of alcohol problems. They surveyed 24 sets of parents aged 18 years or older living in rural Kansas who had children aged 10-20 years.

In response to the questionnaire, 100% of the parents said that they had talked to their children about alcohol, and 100% agreed that a family history of alcohol problems increased children's risk. Most (96%) said they believed families with a history of alcohol problems should inform their children. Of the 83% of parents who reported a family history of problems, 57% said they had informed the children about this history. Overall, 63% had family rules concerning drinking, with punishments for breaking the rules. The children were not interviewed about their alcohol use. They averaged 15 years old, the average age of first alcohol use in Kansas, Dr. Richter noted at the conference, also sponsored by Brown Medical School.

Parents who had discussed a family history of alcohol problems with children said they didn't want their children to repeat the mistakes of other family members and that they had lost many family members to alcohol problems. Parents who had not discussed a family history of alcohol problems with children cited young age of children and the fact that alcohol was "not an issue yet" as reasons for not broaching the topic.

—Heidi Splete