Background

Reports in existing literature have consistently indicated that health and social care professionals may hold moralistic or stereotypical views of illicit drug users. Differences in attitudes have been identified when considering personal attributes or when comparing different groups of professionals. Clearly professional education has a role in addressing negative attitudes as such attitudes may influence the care provided to service users.

Research Questions

1. What factors influence the student nurses’ attitudes toward illicit drug use at the start of their training?
2. How do the attitudes of student nurses, at the start of their training, compare with other health and social care students at a similar stage of higher education?
3. Is there a change in the attitudes of student nurses that can be linked to their first year of education/training?

Research Design

A mixed-method design was adopted with students completing an anonymous questionnaire at the start of their course and at the end of their first year. This questionnaire measured the students’ attitudes and collected data on a range of variables identified in existing literature as significant in terms of attitudes to illicit drugs. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with volunteers who had completed the questionnaires.

Sample

Participants were recruited from four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), offering health and social care education/training courses, spread over five geographical locations within the Midlands area of the UK. Seven full cohorts of students were involved in the study, consisting of two groups of nursing students (encompassing adult, child, mental health and learning disability branch students) (n=154), one group of pre-registration midwifery (n=20), one group of post-registration midwifery (n=8), one group of social work (n=44), one group of clinical psychology (n=16) and a group of health and social care students (n=69).

Data Collection

All students completed an anonymous questionnaire at the start of their course (N=311). This questionnaire measured the students’ attitudes (see below) and collected data on a range of variables identified as significant in terms of attitudes to illicit drugs. The questionnaire was reissued to the same students at the end of their first year (N=267). Semi-structured interviews (see interview schedule below) were conducted with volunteers, from the students who had completed the questionnaires (n=25).

Results Research Question 1

In answering research question 1 it was found that only variables relating to personal experiences of illicit drug use, awareness of illicit drug use by family or friends and the commonality of illicit drug use in the area in which the student grew up, achieved a medium effect size. None of the other variables considered using bivariate approaches registered a medium or stronger effect size using Cohen’s d (see table below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Mean comparison</th>
<th>d</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal use of illicit drugs</td>
<td>Yes &gt; No</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of illicit drug use by family or friends</td>
<td>Yes &gt; No</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonality of illicit drug use in area of growth</td>
<td>Yes &gt; No</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation</td>
<td>Yes &gt; No</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Yes &gt; No</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Yes &gt; No</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (subject of study)</td>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional qualification</td>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, it is reasonable to assume that growing up in an area where illicit drug use is more common, having friends and family who have used illicit drugs, and personal use of illicit drugs may be associated with each other, hence a multivariate regression model was also developed.

Research Design

A thematic approach was used to analyse the qualitative data, the emphasis being upon how themes added to an overall understanding of the answers to the research questions set for the study. Data analysis highlighted the prominence of a theme labelled ‘knowledge’ and its link to the students’ expressed views on illicit drug use. This theme appeared to develop from the students’ personal use of illicit drugs and the experiences they gained through social and environmental contact with illicit drug users. Whilst this theme was consistently described as developing over the students lifetime, it was reported to be an important influence on current attitudes.

Results Research Question 2

The following graph illustrates mean attitude score based on student group.

Research Design

The results of a Wilcoxon signed-rank test (the non-parametric equivalent of a paired samples t-test) on the student nurses’ attitude scores indicated that there was only a small effect size when comparing the student nurses scores at the start of their training and at the end of their first year (z = -1.83, p = 0.17). Minimal changes in attitudes were detected over the first year of training for all student groups. However, the student nurses’ attitudes increased, whereas the comparison groups all decreased. Interviewees generally concurred with these findings, indicating that they didn’t feel that their attitudes had changed over their first year of training/education.

Conclusions

The study supports the need for a specific educational focus on illicit drug use, as simply entering professional education appears insufficient in addressing negative attitudes. However, any educational approach aimed at improving attitudes needs to take into account the students’ prior experiences around illicit drugs. Variations between student groups suggest that Interprofessional Education (IPE) may provide an opportunity to improve attitudes towards illicit drug users, particularly amongst student nurses. The IRCA (2013, p.36) suggest approaches such as ‘inquiry-based, team-based, work-based, or simulation-based models of teaching learning and assessment’ are more effective in challenging attitudes than more traditional didactic approaches.

References: