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An Epidemiological Study of the Relationships
between Exposure to Traumatic Events,
Prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
and Alcohol Abuse in Remote Aboriginal
Communities

Thesis submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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November 2004

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Abstract

This epidemiological study explores the relationships between exposure to traumatic events, the prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and alcohol abuse in two remote towns and surrounding communities in Central West region of Western Australia. There is ample evidence from the literature indicating that people who are exposed to traumatic events suffer from PTSD, and are more likely to abuse alcohol and other substances. Despite data indicating that Aboriginal people have been exposed to traumatic events at rates higher than the national average, the prevalence of PTSD and its relationship to alcohol abuse has not been investigated adequately. This study explores this relationship using four different instruments: the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI); the Impact of Events Scale (IES); the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT); and the Indigenous Trauma Profile (ITP). A total of 221 subjects, consisting of 104 men and 117 women, took part in the study.

The study found that 97.3% of subjects were exposed to traumatic events and 55.2% met the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for PTSD. The majority, 73.8% met DSM diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse and 33.5% of subjects met criteria for alcohol dependence disorder. Cannabis abuse accounted for 23.5% of subjects while 5.9% met criteria for cannabis dependence and 2.7% had abused inhalants. A proportion of subjects also met criteria for mood disorder, including major depressive disorder, recurrent (20%) and single

episode 2.3%, and dysthymic disorder 1.8% and anxiety disorders were 17.2% of subjects. Within the latter group, specific phobia is 47.4%, general anxiety disorder accounts for 26.3%, agoraphobia and panic disorder were the third largest with rate of 7.9% respectively.

The findings establish a relationship between exposure to traumatic events, prevalence of PTSD and alcohol abuse. In subjects with PTSD 91% have alcohol abuse disorder. This accounted for 68.1% of the alcohol abusing population. In this group, onset of PTSD symptoms preceded the onset of alcohol abuse in 67.6% of subjects, evidence of the hypothesis that alcohol abuse is self-medication to suppress symptoms of PTSD. Onset age analysis showed that 69.1% of all PTSD cases and 67.1% of all alcohol abuse cases were identified by the age of 20. This high rate for both PTSD and alcohol abuse at a younger age group indicates exposure to traumatic events at an early age. The study also found that a significant group had subclinical PTSD symptoms: intrusion 76.9%, avoidance 78.7% and hyperarousal 90.04% as shown in IES results.

In conclusion, the rate of exposure to traumatic events and the prevalence of PTSD are higher in these communities than the recorded prevalence in the general population. There is a strong relationship between exposure to traumatic events and prevalence of PTSD and alcohol abuse.