Title: Comparison of Alcohol Abusers Who Seek Traditional Treatment Versus Those Who Use An Online Program

Authors:
Suena W. Huang, M.D. and Daniel Z. Lieberman, M.D.

Abstract:
The majority of individuals with alcohol use disorders do not receive treatment. Access to treatment for substance abuse disorders is limited, and practical strategies are needed to expand opportunities for individuals to receive effective interventions. A recently developed online program was designed to increase users’ motivation for change and offer treatment options. Utilization of the unique strengths of the Internet allowed a hidden, currently untreated population to be reached.

Methodology:
The purpose of this study was to determine if an automated, online program designed for individuals with alcohol use problems can reach people who are not served by currently available treatment options. The Internet-based program, made available at www.alcoholcheckup.com, guided subjects through a series of standardized questionnaires and provided them with feedback designed to enhance their appreciation of the negative aspects of their alcohol use. Users of the program were compared to a population of traditional help-seeking individuals in terms of age, gender, employment status, disease severity, alcohol consumption, and level of motivation for change as measured by the Stages of Change Readiness and Treatment Eagerness Scale (SOCRATES). Subjects enrolled in the Matching Alcoholism Treatments to Client Heterogeneity study (Project MATCH) were used for comparison. Project MATCH was a multi-site study conducted in the United States that was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Because special attention was paid to recruiting a heterogeneous sample that was representative of the population of help-seeking individuals accessing currently available treatment, Project MATCH yielded highly relevant comparison data.

Results:
Over a period of 25 months, data was collected from 1,455 individuals, 1,297 (83%) of whom had an Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) score greater than 8, which is associated with a putative alcohol use disorder. The Project MATCH data set contained information on 1,726 subjects. The population that accessed alcoholcheckup.com suffered from significant alcohol-related morbidity. The average AUDIT score was 20, however this was significantly less than the project MATCH population (26.1), indicating that the Internet group had somewhat less severe pathology. There was a greater percentage of women - an underserved population in the substance abuse field - in the alcoholcheckup group, and this group was also younger, and more likely to be employed. Most importantly, the alcoholcheckup group scored lower on measures of motivation for change compared to the group in traditional treatment.

Conclusions:
Alcoholcheckup.com was able to reach a hidden population with serious alcohol problems that was significantly different from the population served by traditional programs. Reaching this less motivated population may allow the program to serve as a stepping stone, moving alcohol abusers into treatment at an earlier stage of their illness.