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LETTERS

GPS AND SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

Children's alcohol use is also a safeguarding issue

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I agree that GPs should take on increased responsibility for the safeguarding of children,¹ and that early detection of maltreatment is a key aspect. Screening for alcohol use among younger adolescents would also be useful.

Although the main burden of chronic alcohol related disease is in adults, its foundations often lie in adolescence.² The proportion of 11-15 year olds in England reporting that they had drunk alcohol decreased from 62% to 43% between 1988 and 2012, but the mean amount consumed almost doubled (from 6.4 to 12.4 units a week) between 1994 and 2012.

Alcohol consumption and related harm increase steeply from 12 to 20 years of age. Patterns of binge drinking emerge in middle adolescence (ages 15-17), and this is associated with increased physical and psychological morbidity.³ Although alcohol use disorders are relatively uncommon in early adolescence, alcohol has a disproportionately adverse effect on younger adolescents. It predisposes them to damage to the developing brain and to developing alcohol dependence in later life, and it also increases the risk of disability.

GPs are already using alcohol screening and brief interventions in adult patients. However, current guidelines and the Quality and Outcomes Framework do not adequately deal with the problem of alcohol consumption in under 18 year olds,

particularly younger adolescents. A recent review of such screening and brief intervention in adolescents commends the use of CRAFFT and AUDIT in healthcare settings to identify at risk adolescents and suggests that motivational interventions reduce levels of alcohol consumption and associated harms.⁴

We are currently exploring new methods of alcohol screening and brief intervention in adolescents who present to emergency departments (www.sipsjunior.net/) and hope that the findings from this research will translate into the broader general practice setting.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: www.bmj.com/content/349/bmj.g4494/rr/761004.

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