

MEDICAL OFFICERS OF SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

GUIDELINES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF ALCOHOL INTOXICATION

Alcohol intoxication should be treated seriously by all members of staff. Deep coma following alcohol ingestion is a medical emergency. 1 litre of spirits can be lethal, with smaller quantities putting younger children at risk.

Consider other possible causes for the pupil's physical state. These include head injury, epilepsy, diabetes and drugs, each of which could be combined with alcohol.

Take a history of the drinking episode from any witnesses as well as from the pupil. Pupils rarely drink on their own, there may be more than one intoxicated person.

Examination

Establish the level of consciousness, and any impairment in clarity of speech and balance. Record size of pupils and their reaction to light and presence of nystagmus, especially if sustained on lateral gaze. Record pulse, BP, temperature, and details of emotional state. Measure blood glucose level.

Death from alcohol intoxication can be due to inhalation of vomit, hypoglycaemia, and respiratory suppression, hypothermia and acute toxic hepatitis.

Management

- a) An unconscious pupil must have airway checked, be placed in the recovery position and admitted to hospital by ambulance.
- b) A pupil suspected of having a head injury as well as intoxication must be admitted to hospital by ambulance.
- c) Conscious pupils may be managed by close observation until they have recovered, usually four hours. Give drinks containing sugar or glucose, unless they are vomiting. Cover with blanket.

Having a cold shower, drinking strong coffee or taking physical activity does not influence the rate of disappearance of alcohol from the blood.

Hypoglycaemia

In adults, alcohol has little effect on plasma glucose in those who have eaten regular meals. However, after a 24 hour fast, when glycogen depleted, alcohol consumption causes marked hypoglycaemia. Hypoglycaemia can cause fits. Children, with their greater proportional turnover of food supply, can have alcohol induced hypoglycaemia after only a few hours without food, and this can have fatal consequences.

Every boarding school should have a written policy for the management of alcohol intoxication. This should state where they can be observed, and by whom, including extra help if aggressive behaviour likely.