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Prevalence of alcohol-induced psychotic disorders

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Sirs: Little is known about the prevalence of alcohol-induced psychotic disorders. A prevalence of 0.4% was found among alcoholic inpatients in a university hospital ($N = 3,052$). Data from official German hospital statistics show a corresponding prevalence of 0.6–0.7% over several years. Thus, compared to other neuropsychiatric disorders such as alcohol withdrawal delirium, alcohol-induced psychotic disorders are a rare complication in alcoholism.

Alcoholism can cause acute paranoid-hallucinatory psychosis but few studies have focused on this syndrome. Patients suffer predominantly from auditory but also visual hallucinations and delusions of persecution [2, 3, 6, 7, 11]. In contrast to alcohol delirium, the sensorium is clear and withdrawal symptoms are weak or missing. In the older psychiatric literature, the term alcohol hallucinosis was used to describe this schizophrenia-like syndrome [2, 3].

Although prognosis is good, 10–20% of patients with alcohol psychosis will develop a chronic schizophrenia-like syndrome [3]. The differential diagnosis between

schizophrenia with secondary alcoholism and alcohol-induced psychosis can be difficult, and a substantial number of studies have reported a significant comorbidity of schizophrenia with substance use disorders [1, 5]. The pathophysiology of alcohol psychosis is not clear [7] but a thalamic dysfunction may play a role [4, 8–10].

Little is known about the prevalence of alcohol hallucinosis. Victor and Adams [13] found that 2% of alcoholic patients suffered from pure auditory hallucinations. Tsuang et al. [12] studied a cohort of 643 patients and reported that one quarter of alcoholics had experienced hallucinations in their lifetime and that 48 (7%) of their patients met the ICD-10 diagnosis for alcohol hallucinosis.

We performed a retrospective chart review and file analysis in which we included all patients treated in the Psychiatric Hospital of the University of Munich between 1997 and 2007 who met the ICD-10 diagnosis of alcohol dependence ($N = 3,052$). Patients with substance abuse other than alcohol were excluded from the analysis. Only 13 patients (9 men, 4 females) met the ICD-10 diagnosis for alcohol psychosis (F10.5x), indicating a prevalence rate of only 0.4%. All patients reported auditory hallucinations. They had a mean age of 47 (33–74) years and an alcohol history of 13 (2–21) years.

Additional evidence for a rather low prevalence of alcohol-induced psychotic disorder comes from official German hospital statistics reporting ICD codes for all patients discharged from hospital after full-time inpatient treatment (Statistisches Bundesamt, <http://www.gbe-bund.de>). In 2005, nationwide 299,428 patients were treated as inpatients for alcohol-related disorders (F10.diagnosis). While there were 14,556 cases of

alcohol withdrawal delirium (4.8%), only 1,915 patients met the criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol-induced psychotic disorder (0.6%). Prevalence estimates from the German hospital statistics have been stable over recent years (2004: 2,242 cases in 290,684 patients, 0.7%; 2003: 2,212 cases in 286,115 patients, 0.7%).

We conclude from these data that alcohol hallucinosis is a rather rare syndrome, particularly in comparison to alcohol delirium. Since the prognosis is often good and some patients may not present at a hospital, the reported figures may be an underestimation. Still, the data seem consistent over time and indicate a low prevalence of alcohol psychosis of 0.4–0.7% in alcohol-dependent patients, even in psychiatric samples.

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■ **Conflict of Interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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