

THE ABSTRACT

It has been shown recently that workload, stress, and burnout syndrome among the staff of the medical rescue service may be major risk factors in terms of triggering the use of psychoactive substances. Representing what is understandably a delicate issue, substance use among emergency medical staff has not been thoroughly studied in our country.

Emergency medical workers' difficult working conditions and the chronic stress they are exposed to, in combination with a lack of support and care on the part of their employers, result in exhaustion and general distress, accompanied by the development of symptoms associated with both physical and mental disorders. This condition may lead to the use of psychoactive substances as a negative coping strategy.

Consisting of both theoretical background and case studies, the paper points out the relationship between the chronic effect of stressors pertaining to the job of emergency medical workers and the use of psychoactive substances as a way of coping with and compensating for the implications of work-related stress and fatigue. Thorough case studies are presented to demonstrate the onset and development of addictive behaviour within a wider context, with special emphasis being placed on its association with coping with both acute and chronic occupational strain. The paper underlines that both the emergency medical workers and their employers should learn and continuously engage in systematic preventive strategies, as well as noting the importance of the psychosocial care of the staff of emergency medical services. Although vital to this work of a specific nature, psychosocial care is often underestimated and the quality and extent of its provision vary significantly among the regional emergency medical services in the Czech Republic.

Key words: psychoactive substances – negative coping mechanisms – helping professions – stress – burnout syndrome – addictive behaviour – emergency medical service