

RE-THINKING HOW WE ASK INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS TO DESCRIBE THEIR DRINKING

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Aim of Abstract:

There are many challenges in assessing alcohol consumption in any population. These can be amplified for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Australians, because of sharing of drinking containers, episodic patterns of drinking and culturally distinct approaches to communication. This symposium will explore why we need to re-think how we ask Indigenous Australians about their drinking, drawing from clinical, community and cultural experiences and on available research. We will also consider the questions in national household surveys. The symposium will introduce a newly developed way to collect self-reported drinking data from Indigenous Australians. To further illustrate the need for a well-thought out approach, preliminary findings will be presented on patterns of drinking in individuals (aged 16+) collected using an interactive iPad application ('app').

Presentation 1 – Why a new approach is needed to help Indigenous Australians

Presenting Authors: Jimmy Perry, Kate Conigrave

Introduction / Issues:

Governments use population estimates of alcohol use to inform funding and design of approaches to prevent and treat unhealthy alcohol use. However, there are severe shortcomings in data about alcohol use among Indigenous Australians. For example, estimates from the largest national survey of Indigenous Australian drinking patterns reportedly underestimate consumption by over 200% for males and 700% for females. In this talk we discuss the particular challenges in assessing drinking among Indigenous Australians. We discuss potential solutions to these challenges.

Method / Approach:

An overview of the challenges in assessing alcohol use among Indigenous Australians in clinical settings and in household surveys will be presented, using practical examples.

The clinical and policy importance of errors will be discussed, and potential solutions proposed.

Key Findings:

In past national surveys, methods used to collect self-report data on drinking from Indigenous Australians were often found to be unsuitable. This was because of difficulties in survey administration and in survey content. Typical questions on drinking assume a regularity of drinking, whereas drinking may stop and start depending on finances, social context or geographic location. Examples of clinical and survey attempts to assess drinking, and their pitfalls will be presented for audience discussion. The potential suitability of alternative approaches to assessing consumption that have been developed by researchers or clinicians will be considered.

Discussions and Conclusions:

Some internationally used approaches (e.g. last four occasions 'Finnish' method, or Timeline Follow-back may have value in describing irregular drinking patterns). Clinicians have developed a range of strategies to overcome challenges in consumption, which may be able to be adapted for survey use and studied. Tablet computer technology can potentially reduce some of the challenges (e.g. converting the drink consumed into an equivalent number of 'standard' drinks). Further research is still needed to find a way to standardize assessment of drinking, but still keep it human and responsive.

Implications for Practice or Policy (optional):

Accurate assessment of drinking allows better screening and earlier discussion of unhealthy drinking. In alcohol dependence, more accurate clinical assessment makes it easier to predict likelihood of alcohol withdrawal and need for active treatment. Better communication about drinking patterns also helps provide more meaningful information on health risks of alcohol.

Implications for Translational Research (optional):

Better ways to ask about drinking can be applied in clinical and public health contexts. More accurate population data in household surveys can better inform alcohol prevention or treatment strategies. Better data can also be used by communities' to monitor how they are going in addressing unhealthy alcohol use.

Presentation 2 – An iPad 'App' to help Indigenous Australians describe their drinking

Presenting Authors: Scott Wilson, Kylie Lee

Introduction / Issues:

There is a severe lack of accurate data on patterns of drinking among Indigenous Australians. The most reliable data is more than two decades old and specific to Indigenous Australians in urban areas. Sensitivity of the topic of alcohol, particularly among Indigenous Australians, can pose extra challenges in household surveys or clinical settings. We will describe the processes used to develop a tablet application (an iPad 'App') to help Indigenous Australians to describe their drinking. A demonstration of the pilot version of the app will be provided with the help of an audience member.

Method / Approach:

The survey items and app interface were developed iteratively based on consultations with Aboriginal community members and health professionals and a review of published and grey literature. Survey items were drafted and app functionality built following feedback from Aboriginal health professionals, survey experts, researchers and investigators.

Key Findings:

The survey offered in plain English and in an Aboriginal language (Pitjantjatjara, that is commonly spoken in regions of South Australia, Western Australia and Northern Territory) uses tablet technologies to help participants to describe their drinking, even if they are not comfortable with numbers or reading. The survey includes options to estimate alcohol consumption as an individual or as part of a group (to determine an individual's share). Several modifications to language were made on the advice of Aboriginal health professionals, to ensure greater suitability of survey items for an Indigenous Australian context.

Discussion and Conclusions:

This study describes the process taken to develop a tablet-based survey 'App' to help Indigenous Australians to describe and measure their drinking. This appealing format of the App is likely to have use in other marginalized populations.

Implications for Practice or Policy (optional)

This survey app may potentially provide a gold standard against which shorter screening tools can be validated. The approaches used in the App can provide an illustration for clinicians and researchers of techniques that can be used to ask about alcohol more sensitively and accurately.

Implications for Translational Research (optional)

The approach taken to develop the App and its key features are likely to be useful for a wide range of marginalized or displaced populations including in settings where non-standard drinking containers are used (e.g. 600ml juice bottles).

Presentation 3 – Patterns of drinking collected on the Grog Survey App

Presenting Authors: Kylie Lee, Sarah Callinan

Introduction / Issues:

Indigenous Australian drinking patterns may be very different from other Australians due to cultural and socio-economic factors. For example, some people may be abstinent for much of the year but only drink around times of grief and loss. Some may live in dry communities and only drink when in town. There has been a lack of accurate data on drinking patterns among this group. Better data is needed to inform treatment and prevention efforts. This talk will present preliminary findings of drinking patterns data collected on the Grog Survey App.

Design and Methods:

Surveys were conducted on an iPad App in urban Queensland and remote/regional South Australia (n=200 in total). Stratified sampling was used, to ensure a sample of dependent and non-dependent drinkers as well as non drinkers. Recruitment occurred at several settings, including the local Indigenous primary health care services, a drop-in centre and by word of mouth. In addition to completing the Grog Survey App twice, each

participant also took part in a clinical interview about their drinking conducted by an Indigenous health professional around the time of the first survey administration.

Key Findings:

Preliminary results on patterns of drinking will be presented to illustrate the range of frequency, timing and quantity of alcohol consumed, the preferred container types and whether participants chose to estimate their drinking as an individual or as their share of what the whole group drank. The greatest length of abstinent periods in the past year and key triggers to drinking will be described. Participant and research assistants' feedback on administering the survey will also be presented.

Discussion and Conclusions:

This data illustrates the range of drinking patterns, and the implications of that for how consumption can be better assessed. Stratified sampling was used, so this data does not reflect how common these drinking patterns are in the community. Tablet-based survey interfaces present one solution to assessing drinking among Indigenous Australians, where the participant is able to focus on what they did and drank on a given occasion, rather than needing to calculate equivalent "standard" drinks. In the next phase of this study, based on analysis and feedback, we will further refine the questions used to optimize the fit with Indigenous Australian contexts.

Implications for Practice or Policy (optional)

An increased understanding drinking patterns in Indigenous Australians will better inform strategies for brief intervention, and treatment. The data can help inform improvement of household survey approaches, and more meaningful policy development.

Implications for Translational Research (optional)

Technology can potentially be used in waiting rooms of health services to get people thinking about their drinking, and to collect self-report data on drinking patterns that could be shared with their health professional. Tablet technology may provide for more accurate data collection in the field in household surveys.

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Discussion Section:

An expert panel chaired by Jimmy Perry will be convened to answer audience questions and discuss clinical and survey implications of the research findings. Jimmy brings a unique mix of skills to this task. He is a Ngarrindjerri/Arrernte man who has extensive experience in remote and regional communities in prevention and clinical management approaches in alcohol (and other drug) use. He is also trained as an Aboriginal health worker and has a Masters in Indigenous health and substance use.

The panel will include representatives of the chief investigators on the Grog Survey App project, community advisers, research assistants and students. Implications will be discussed, including for screening in primary care and hospital, for health promotions and for national household surveys. Participants in the symposia will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the project from inception until the current stage and to comment on the approaches used, and potential future improvements in alcohol survey approaches among Indigenous Australians.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This work is supported by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC; Project Grant ID#1087192, and a Practitioner Fellowship for Kate Conigrave).