Early Non-Medical Prescription Drug Use Related to Lifetime Diagnosis of Prescription Drug Abuse and Dependence

Persons who begin using prescription drugs non-medically at an early age are more likely to be diagnosed with lifetime prescription drug abuse and dependence, according to an analysis of data from a national household survey.* An estimated 42% of those who reported that their first non-medical use of prescription drugs was at age 13 or younger also had a lifetime diagnosis of prescription drug abuse, compared to 17% of those who first used prescription drugs non-medically at age 21 or older. Similar results were found for lifetime prescription drug dependence (25% vs. 7%). Interestingly, “early non-medical users of prescription sedatives, tranquilizers, and opioids were generally more likely to become non-medical users of other prescription drug classes than to develop sedative, tranquilizer or opioid use disorders” (p. 1925). For example, persons who initiated non-medical use of prescription sedatives at age 13 or younger were more likely to eventually report non-medical use of prescription tranquilizers (75%), opioids (72%), or stimulants (70%) than to be diagnosed with a sedative use disorder (43%). The exception was for non-medical users of prescription stimulants, who were more likely to develop stimulant use disorders than to become non-medical users of other prescription drugs (data not shown).

Estimated Prevalence of Lifetime Prescription Drug Abuse and Dependence, by Age at First Non-Medical Use of Prescription Drugs

*Findings are based on an analysis of data from the 2001-2002 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, a household survey of U.S. residents ages 18 and older.


** 301-405-9770 (voice) ** 301-403-8342 (fax) ** CESAR@cesar.umd.edu ** www.cesar.umd.edu **

CESAR FAX may be copied without permission. Please cite CESAR as the source.

The Governor’s Office of Crime Control and Prevention funded this project under grant BJAG 2005-1065. All points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of any State agency.