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Identifying parents with risky alcohol consumption habits in a paediatric unit – are screening and brief intervention appropriate methods?

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Background: There is no systematic identification of parents with excessive alcohol use who have a child admitted to hospital. Children in families with excessive alcohol issues form a high risk group as substantial alcohol consumption has a damaging influence on a child emotionally, cognitively, socially and physically. Alcohol consumption is a sensitive issue, and health staff needs knowledge, qualifications and adequate training in communicating with parents about this taboo.

Aim:
• To identify specific patterns in subgroups of parents by comparing results from screening and demographic variables
• To identify systematic patterns in staff members by demographic variables to decide whether these factors influence the screening results.

Methods: During 1 year, screening and brief intervention (SBI) was accomplished, including health staff conducting dialogues with parents of a hospitalized child using motivational interviewing (MI) and screening for risky alcohol behaviour by Cut down, Annoyance from others, feel Guilty, Early-morning Craving (CAGE)-C. Data were analysed by descriptive statistics, and relationships were tested with a statistical significance level of 0.05, using SPSS (version 16.0).

Results: Motivational dialogues with 779 parents were conducted by 43 staff members, and 11% of the parents were screened positive for risky alcohol behaviour. Drinking alcohol 4 days a week or more and drinking alcohol outside mealtimes were main risk factors. Parents’ gender was the strongest predictor of screening positive and OR was 6.8 for men (CI 4.03–11.74) compared to women, p < 0.0001. An OR of 1.2 for parents’ age (CI 1.02–1.42) indicates the risk of screening positive increases with age, p = 0.027.

Conclusions: Brief intervention using CAGE-C and MI has proven successful in mapping parents’ alcohol consumption patterns and in identifying parents with risky alcohol consumption habits. Health staff is able to manage health promotion and prevention when having the right competences and when being supervised.

Keywords: screening, opportunistic brief intervention, motivational interviewing, risky alcohol behaviour, children, barriers among health staff.

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Introduction

Alcohol is the third most significant risk factor for ill health and premature death in the EU, behind tobacco and high blood pressure. In the EU, it is estimated that one in six adults drinks at hazardous or harmful levels, defined as at least 40 g alcohol per day for a man and 30 g for a woman (1). In United States, it is estimated that one of every four children is living with an adult who has an alcohol problem (2).

A person’s excessive use of alcohol affects close relatives, and especially children are susceptible to their parents’ excessive use of alcohol (1, 2).

Children in families with excessive alcohol use constitute a high risk group. Substantial alcohol consumption has a damaging influence on a child’s development and can affect the child emotionally, cognitively, socially and
physically (3–5). These children tend to have frequent contacts to general practitioners and are admitted to hospital more often because of accidents, incontinence, persistent headaches, stomach aches, nausea, muscle and skeletal pain or infections (3, 6, 7).

When children are admitted to hospital with blurred psychosomatic symptoms that needs unravelling, they could originate from alcohol-related problems in the family. Several studies highlight that admission of children is an opportunity to detect parents' excessive use of alcohol, to inform and educate the parents or intervene if necessary and thus prevent the development of further alcohol abuse in the family (4, 8, 9).

A systematic review of hospital screening studies for high-risk alcohol consumption found a prevalence of positive screens from 16 to 26% (8). Although brief advice has proven to be a cost-effective evidence-based treatment method in Europe, <10% of the hazardous and harmful drinkers are identified and <5% of those who could benefit are offered brief advice (10).

Systematic screening of apparently well-functioning parents of children admitted to hospital has not yet been carried out, but will, most likely, produce a different result than when screening adults admitted to hospital.

**Studies on alcohol abuse in parents of hospitalized children**

An Australian study screened 7.8% of 193 parents positive for excessive use of alcohol by structured interviews based on the AUDIT CORE screening test in a paediatric emergency department (11). An American study screened 11.5% of 929 parents positive for problem alcohol use by an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire based on AUDIT and TWEAK screening test in a paediatric primary care clinic (12). These two studies concluded that there is an undetected prevalence of parents with risky alcohol behaviour and that parents were generally willing to talk about their alcohol consumption habits.

**Health staff facing the topic of alcohol**

Unwillingness to face the topic of alcohol and other personal attitudes towards excessive use of alcohol in the clinical staff may cause problems to be ignored or that the patient is exposed to judgmental behaviour (4, 13). Personal attitudes may originate from their own alcohol consumption habits, alcohol abuse problems in their own network or genuine consideration for the child, lack of time and insecurity or fear of reactions when discussing alcohol habits (14, 15).

The greatest barriers, though, for discussing life style factors such as alcohol consumption habits are that staff lacks professional skills and knowledge about alcohol abuse treatment. Moreover, staff may lack appropriate communicative skills concerning life style matters (4, 16).

**Brief intervention**

Brief intervention, focus on mobilizing own resources for change is empirically proven to work well in relation to life style problems, including alcohol issues (17–20). Studies using the communication method ‘motivational interviewing’ (MI) have reported better results than traditional counselling, especially regarding life style changes (21–25). MI has proven effective in 15-minute dialogues and has reported no negative side effects (19, 23). To our knowledge, MI focusing on alcohol consumption habits has not previously been applied to parents with hospitalized children.

**Aims and objectives**

The paper reports results from screening and brief intervention (SBI), including health staff conducting preventive dialogues with parents of hospitalized children. The staff members use the MI method and screen for risky alcohol behaviour using CAGE-C (26). SBI in this context is systematic and opportunistic; the parents have not complained about or asked for advice or help concerning alcohol-related problems.

The intervention is targeted at parents with excessive alcohol habits who are not physically dependent of alcohol.

This study investigates whether it is possible

- to identify specific patterns in subgroups of parents by comparing results from CAGE-C to demographic variables related to the parents
- to identify systematic patterns in the staff members by demographic variables to gain insight into whether these factors influence the results of the CAGE-C screening.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The participants were all parents with a child admitted to the Department of Paediatrics, H. C. Andersen Children's Hospital, Denmark, in the period of September 2007 to November 2008; the children were admitted to either the neonatal care unit for infants below 1 months of age or the general medical unit for children aged 1–16 years. A parent was defined as any person with legal care obligations towards the hospitalized child, i.e. biological, foster and adopting parents holding full or shared custody of the child as well as cohabiting adults. Exclusion criteria were parents who did not read or speak Danish and parents who had already participated in the study. During the intervention period, 2468 admissions were registered. The number of admissions included mothers and multiple admissions, twins and triplets. Nurses on strike for a period of 8 weeks caused delay in that period. Controlling for these factors, parents of 1384 admitted children were finally included by registration: 763 from the neonatal unit and 621 from the
medical unit. A total of 18 (1.3%) parents declined the invitation directly (eight parents from the neonatal unit and 10 from the medical unit). From 640 admissions, 779 parents, including 139 couples, answered the screening questions. Details on inclusion are shown in Fig. 1.

The intervention

When admitted to the ward, the staff included parents into the project by entering an identification code from the screening sheet to a label with personally identifiable data of the child. These data were kept confidential, leaving the screening sheet only with an identification code and no personally recognizable information. Prior to entering the project, the parents received an information sheet explaining the project, followed by oral information from staff, emphasizing participation as being voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without consequences for the treatment of the child. The preventive dialogue was conducted by the staff using the MI method.

The preventive dialogue lasted 10–30 minutes.

Data were entered and screened for errors by subsequently selecting a 20% sample by picking out the first 20 of every 100 screening sheets, following entry of all responses from the screening sheet. Two incidental typing errors were detected and corrected in the 20% sample selection according to 1.24% errors in the sample. No systematic errors were detected.

Methods of intervention

Prior to the intervention, the staff had completed a 5-day training course in MI, including basic knowledge of alcohol risk factors and abuse, and the principles in alcohol abuse treatment.

The course was conducted by a qualified Trainer in MI, based on the theoretical framework of MI by Miller & Rollnick (27). The course introduced the methods of MI by discussions and training in groups, involving participants in role-plays and workshops to practice the MI skills in the parent–staff relationship, focusing on alcohol consumption habits. As MI is client-centred, learning and being familiar with the spirit of the method is of great importance, as well as responding in a flexible and continuous way to a person’s readiness to change (28). See Description of MI in Box 1 and Where change must happen in Box 2.

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Figure 1 Flow diagram of inclusion and exclusion.
The screening instrument CAGE-C assesses persons in risk of having an alcohol problem. Cut down, Annoyance from others, feel Guilty, Early-morning Craving (CAGE) was developed and validated by JA Ewing in the early 1980s (26). CAGE–Copenhagen is a variety of the original instrument, modified by a Danish research team (29). The original CAGE referred to life experience with alcohol, whereas the modification in CAGE-C narrows the experience to the past year (Box 3). CAGE-C has been tested and compared to diagnostic interviews based on ICD criteria and biochemical markers (Golden Standards) on a randomly selected sample of adult surgical patients in a Danish hospital. CAGE-C was validated with a sensitivity of 0.94 (CI 0.82–0.99) and a specificity of 0.88 (CI 0.83–0.89) and with a positive and negative predictive value of 0.73 (CI 0.63–0.77) and 0.98 (CI 0.93–0.99), respectively (29). Ninety-five per cent confidence intervals (CI) are shown in parentheses.

Among other screening instruments, CAGE-C was chosen because of its short form and by that, easy to administer for the staff members in the clinical practice.

In addition to CAGE-C, demographic data along with the medical diagnosis were obtained. As it was voluntary to participate, reasons for not wanting to participate were asked. Staff members’ name, age, years of experience and of employment in the unit were reported.

Medical ICD diagnosis of children was obtained from the patient registration office and examined by frequency tables to determine any systematic tendency of the staff preferring some groups of parents because of the diagnosis of the child.

Statistics

Data were explored using descriptive statistics. For continuous variables, summary statistics were provided by mean and standard deviation. For categorical variables, frequency tables were prepared. Cross-tabulations and graphs supported the investigation of the response pattern. Underlying assumptions of inference tests were investigated by preliminary analysis to ensure an appropriate
application of the tests. Model fit was tested using Hosmer and Lemeshow’s test.

Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between continuous variables. Chi-square and Fisher’s exact test were used to establish relationships between categorical variables.

Standard multiple regression analysis was employed to assess the causal relationship between the number of negative and positive screens performed by 43 staff members as dependent variable on the one hand and the overall number of dialogues performed by each staff member, age of staff member, years of professional experience and years of employment in the unit as explanatory variables.

Logistic regression was performed to assess the impact of a number of factors on the likelihood that the parents would be screened positive. The model contained five independent variables (gender of parents, age of parents, age of staff, educational level of staff members and years of employment of staff member in the unit).

Statistical significance level was 0.05 for all statistical tests. Data were entered in and analysed by the statistical software package SPSS (version16.0).

Ethical issues and approval

This study follows the recommendations in the Declaration of Helsinki (30) and was presented to and approved by the Ethical Committee of Science in the Region of Southern Denmark. According to Danish law, a formal permission is needed only if a biomedical study includes human tissue or blood samples.

Informed consent was given by all study participants. All personally identifiable data were kept safe and confidential following general recommendations (31). The study was not considered to strain the parents or children unnecessarily. Participation was optional, and the screening instruments and communicative methods applied are known and acknowledged in Danish clinical practice.

Results

Comparing results from CAGE-C to demographic variables related to the parents

Screening and brief intervention was accomplished in 779 parents, 501 women (64%) and 278 men (36%).

Age resembled a normal distribution with a minimum of 17 years and a maximum of 67 years, a mean of 35 years and a median of 35 years. A total of 53% of the parents were aged between 31 and 40 years.

In the group of 779 parents, 693 (89%) were screened negative and 86 (11%) were screened positive for risky alcohol behaviour. Among the screened positive parents were 66 men (76.7%) and 20 women (23.3%). The proportion of positively screened men (66 of 278, or 23.7%) was significantly larger than the proportion of positively screened women (20 of 501, or 4.0%), p < 0.0001 by Fisher’s exact test, indicating a statistically significant difference in screening concerning gender.

In the group of parents screened positive, minimum, mean and maximum age was 23, 37.45 and 67 years, respectively. In the group of negatively screened patients, age ranged from 17 to 64 years with a mean value of 34.92 years.

The risk of getting positively screened increased with increasing age (p = 0.037, Freeman–Halton test with age classified into 10-year intervals).

Mating. In the group of 86 parents screened positive, there were 10 couples. This means that in 5 of 81 couples, both parents were screened positive (6.2%). In 61 cases (75.3%), the father was screened positive; in 15 cases (18.5%), the mother was screened positive.

CAGE-C. The results of CAGE questions 1, 2 and 3 (Table 1) demonstrate that 31–36% of the parents screened positive for risky alcohol behaviour agreed that they should decrease their alcohol consumption; they had been annoyed by others criticizing their alcohol behaviour, or

Table 1 Results CAGE-C, question 1–4, 6, and 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results by Cage-C</th>
<th>Group Yes</th>
<th>Women Yes</th>
<th>n = 501 (%)</th>
<th>Men Yes</th>
<th>n = 278 (%)</th>
<th>Group No</th>
<th>n = 779 (%)</th>
<th>Screen pos Yes</th>
<th>Screen neg Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cage1. Felt ought to cut down on drinking</td>
<td>37 (4.7)</td>
<td>15 (3.0)</td>
<td>22 (8.0)</td>
<td>742 (95.3)</td>
<td>31 (36.0)</td>
<td>6 (0.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cage2. Annoyed by criticizing drinking</td>
<td>33 (4.2)</td>
<td>6 (1.2)</td>
<td>27 (9.8)</td>
<td>746 (95.8)</td>
<td>31 (36.0)</td>
<td>2 (0.3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cage3. Felt bad or guilty about drinking</td>
<td>46 (5.9)</td>
<td>19 (3.8)</td>
<td>27 (9.8)</td>
<td>732 (94.1)</td>
<td>27 (31.4)</td>
<td>19 (2.7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cage4. Had a drink first thing in the morning (eye-opener)</td>
<td>4 (0.5)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
<td>3 (1.1)</td>
<td>775 (99.5)</td>
<td>4 (4.7)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cage6. Drink on week-days outside meals</td>
<td>158 (20.3)</td>
<td>48 (9.7)</td>
<td>111 (40.7)</td>
<td>621 (79.7)</td>
<td>66 (76.7)</td>
<td>94 (13.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cage7. Want contact to alc. Treatment clinic</td>
<td>20 (2.6)</td>
<td>12 (2.4)</td>
<td>8 (2.9)</td>
<td>737 (94.6)</td>
<td>7 (8.1)</td>
<td>13 (1.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CAGE, cut down, annoyance from others, feel guilty, early-morning craving.

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they felt bad or guilty about their own drinking in the past year, as opposed by 0.3–2.7% in the group of negatively screened parents.

Few persons in both groups agreed they have had a drink first thing in the morning (CAGE 4).

In the group of parents screened positive, three of four (76.7%) stated that they drank alcohol on weekdays without accompanying food (CAGE 6). The corresponding number was 13.6% in the group of parents screened negative.

Regarding CAGE question 5 ‘how many days a week do you drink alcohol’ (Table 2), 77% of the group screened negative answered 0–1 time a week, opposed by 75% of the group screened positive stating they drank alcohol 4–7 days a week. In the group of people screened positive, 11% drank alcohol every day, whereas this was not the case for any of the people screened negative.

Few parents, 20 (2.6%), wanted contact information to an alcohol treatment clinic (CAGE 7) of whom seven persons originated from the group of positively screened parents (8.1%) and 13 belonged to the group of parents screened negative (1.9%). In all CAGE variables, there was a male dominance towards risky alcohol behaviour.

The combination of answers in the group of parents screened negative compared to the group screened positive was quite different. In the group screened negative, 83.26% of parents answered ‘no’ to the CAGE questions 1–4, and ‘yes’ to the use of alcohol at 0–2 days a week. A total of 7.36% of this group agreed they drank alcohol on weekdays outside mealtimes, and 4% of this group said ‘yes’ to at least one of the CAGE questions 1–4.

In the group that screened positive, 31.39% agreed they drank alcohol 4 days a week or more and they drank alcohol outside mealtimes on weekdays, but answered ‘no’ to the CAGE questions 1–4.

Dropouts. Based on information from the patient registration office, an analysis was run to identify the group of missing cases. Comparing the two groups based on the dialogues that took place and the missing cases, no systematic, detectable reasons for the missing cases were found.

Comparing results from CAGE-C to demographic variables related to the staff

The 43 staff members performing SBI were nurses (34), nurse assistants (7) and pedagogues (2), with a mean age of 45 years (age range from 27 to 58 years). Their mean experience since basic training was 18 years (ranging from 1 to 37 years), and they had been employed for 11 years on average (range: 1 to 29 years) in the department of paediatrics.

They had been performing an average of 18 motivational dialogues with parents, individually ranging between 1 and 58 dialogues.

At the general medical unit, 23 staff members conducted 425 dialogues (18.5 dialogues on average) and 12.8% of the parents screened positive for risky alcohol behaviour.

At the neonatal care unit, 20 staff members conducted 354 dialogues (17.7 dialogues on average) and 9.1% of the parents screened positive for risky alcohol behaviour.

Looking at the interrelation of the staff’s position and the outcome, there seemed to be a slight, but statistically insignificant difference (p = 0.8272, Fisher–Freeman–Halton test), to whether the motivational dialogues were performed by pedagogues, nurses or nurse assistants (Table 3).

Predicting results of screening by logistic regression. The full model containing all predictors was statistically significant (p < 0.0001), indicating that the model was able to distinguish between parents that were screened negative or positive. Using SPSS Classification Table, 88.8% of cases were classified correctly by the model. Two of the independent variables made a statistically significant contribution to the model (gender of parent, p < 0.0001, age of the parent, p = 0.027). The strongest predictor for screening positive was gender of the parent with an odds ratio for being screened positive of 6.8 for men (CI 4.03–11.74)

| Table 2 CAGE-C question 5: How many days per week do you drink alcohol? |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Days              | 0–1 (%) | 2 (%) | 3 (%) | 4 (%) | 5 (%) | 6 (%) | 7 (%) | Total (%) |
| Group N = 779     |        |       |       |       |       |       |       | 100 |
| Women n = 497     | 424 (85.1) | 49 (9.8) | 11 (2.2) | 6 (1.2) | 3 (0.6) | 1 (0.2) | 3 (0.6) | 100 |
| Men n = 275       | 164 (59.6) | 45 (16.4) | 20 (7.3) | 32 (11.6) | 8 (2.9) | 0 (0.0) | 6 (2.2) | 100 |
| Screen pos n = 86 | 13 (15.1) | 12 (14.0) | 5 (5.8) | 36 (41.9) | 10 (11.6) | 1 (1.2) | 9 (10.5) | 100 |
| Screen neg n = 689| 579 (83.8) | 81 (11.7) | 26 (3.8) | 2 (0.3) | 1 (0.1) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 100 |

CAGE, cut down, annoyance from others, feel guilty, early-morning craving.
compared to women. The odds ratio of 1.2 concerning age of the parent (CI 1.02–1.42) indicates that the risk of screening positive increases with age.

Predicting outcome of screening by staff’s experience with linear regression. Using the variable number of positive screenings or number of negative screenings as dependent variable, the $R^2$ estimate revealed that 67.4 and 99.1%, respectively, of the variance was explained by the model. In both analyses, it turned out that the variable that seemed to be the best predictor for the outcome of the screening (positive/negative) was the number of dialogues performed by the staff. The unstandardized B-coefficient for number of dialogues was significant, $p < 0.0001$. The number of dialogues performed by the staff was the independent variable that primarily contributed to the outcome of the dependent variable.

Difference in mean value of expected number of parents screened positive was 0.12 (CI 0.91–0.15) for each additional dialogue performed by the staff.

The scatter plots (Fig. 2) illustrate a moderate linear relation between number of parents screened positive and number of dialogues performed ($R^2 = 0.514$) and a strong linear relation between number of parents screened negative and number of dialogues performed ($R^2 = 0.987$).

### Table 3 Distribution of positive/negative screening according to staff position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Result screen</th>
<th>Pedagogue (%)</th>
<th>Nurse assistant (%)</th>
<th>Nurse (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative $n = 663$</td>
<td>18 (94.7)</td>
<td>132 (90.4)</td>
<td>513 (89.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive $n = 78$</td>
<td>1 (5.3)</td>
<td>14 (9.6)</td>
<td>63 (10.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19 (100)</td>
<td>146 (100)</td>
<td>576 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Discussion

The main findings in this study are that 11% of parents with a child admitted to a paediatric unit screened positive for risky alcohol behaviour and that a majority of parents accepted being screened and expressed positive reactions to the intervention. Using a brief intervention in relation to screening for a topic that might cause embarrassment or worry with the parents seems feasible for producing data representing the parents’ actual drinking behaviour. Ammentorp et al. (32) investigated the effect of communication skills training for clinicians on parents of hospitalized children. Although they found no statistically significant differences, an indication that parents perceive communication more positively when the staff members had been qualified by training course in communication was established, underpinning the importance on focusing on the staff members’ communication skills. When staff members wants to address and discuss difficult topics with parents of hospitalized children, it is possible and more likely to be successful if this is carried out acknowledging and respecting the parents’ autonomy.

A total of 11% of parents with excessive alcohol behaviour was low compared to the general population. This number may reflect a group of parents demonstrating well-developed parenting responsibilities, or that parents with excessive drinking habits refuse to participate or underreport their alcohol consumption habits. Self-reported alcohol consumption in parents was, according to Sharma et al. (11), underreported in 25% because of loss of memory, embarrassment and intimidation and desire to produce socially acceptable responses or because they were not sure of the consequences whether they revealed to have an excessive alcohol abuse problem. Fear of losing custody to the admitted child seems an obvious threat in this study even though a motivational approach was demonstrated during the intervention.
Sharma et al. (11) screened 7.8% of 193 parents in a paediatric emergency department positive for hazardous drinking, using the 10-item CAGE questionnaire in a face-to-face interview. Wilson et al. (12) screened 11.5% of 189 parents positive for problematic or hazardous use of alcohol in an anonymous questionnaire using the five-item Tweak questionnaire and the 10-item Audit questionnaire. Although the studies are performed using different methods, instruments and measures, there is a common trend indicating that parents are willing to discuss their alcohol consumption habits in relation to the child’s admittance.

Although the number of parents with risky alcohol consumption habits in this study may be low according to national figures, a criterion for success in this study is not necessarily the actual number of parents screened positive. The major goal of motivational dialogues is causing reflection among the parents concerning their life style. In that respect, SBI can still have a positive effect, given that the parents may reflect on the dialogue long after it took place, and subsequently start altering their alcohol consumption patterns. Results from a single-session brief intervention may not be captured in a simultaneous screen, but could be detected in a follow-up.

Considering the reservations mentioned previously, a presumably underestimated result of 11% of parents agreeing to having excessive drinking habits calls for serious concern for the clinical staff, as excessive alcohol behaviour in families has a negative impact on children in many aspects. The parents need to be informed and educated, and the preventive dialogues revealed areas where parents may have little or no knowledge. The relation between alcohol-related events in the home and the child’s symptoms are not always obvious to the parents. Helping the parents to reflect and acknowledge their lifestyle and its impact on the child could potentially motivate the parents to change their habits (7, 12, 33).

Identifying subgroups of parents with risky alcohol behaviour

Two of the independent variables of the model were statistically significant: gender and age of parent. The odds ratio 1.2 concerning age of parent (CI 1.02–1.42) indicated the risk of being screened positive increased with age.

In all CAGE variables, there was a male dominance towards risky alcohol behaviour even though the predominance of female caregivers in this study was 64%. These findings are consistent with research on alcohol gender issues proving that men drink more alcohol in general and in binge-drinking and consider their alcohol consumption pattern less problematic than women (8, 34, 35). In a critical review of alcohol screening questionnaires comparing gender responses and sensitivity, Bradley (36) found the CAGE questionnaire insensitive to women in some cases. Evidence of gender differences in developing alcoholism is established by Flensborg-Madsen et al. (37). They found the risk of developing alcoholism increased significantly by very low alcohol intake in women, while the risk for men increased at much higher intake. In an exploratory Swedish study, Birath et al. (38) identified a new group of women with alcohol problems: fairly well-educated, younger women of child-bearing age and suggested alternative treatment. Even though the CAGE questionnaire is considered a valid tool, there may be undetected gender issues in using it that are often referred to as ‘natural’ gender differences based on the assumption that more men than women have problematic alcohol habits. Bradley (36) suggests a lower threshold for a positive screening result should be used for women than for men to identify equal proportions of men and women with alcohol-related problems. Wilson et al. (12) found mothers who screened positive to be less comfortable about it than fathers and ascribed these findings to drinking being more acceptable in men than in women. Women’s excessive use of alcohol may be attributable to feelings of embarrassment, shame or even stigmatization causing them to underestimate their drinking habits. Accordingly, the 4.0% of women screened positive in this study may well be an underestimation.

Do the staff members influence the results of the CAGE-C screening?

How well the staff adhered to using MI needs to be discussed. Project Match (39) suggested that MI therapists vary considerably in their overall skills despite rigorous training and monitoring of performing MI. In a systematic review, Dunn et al. (40) included staff training in MI. Training ranged from 2 to 30 hours (mean 15 hours), but no conclusion to these findings was made. Lundahl and Burke (41) concluded that a minimum of 2 days of interactive workshops followed by ongoing supervision and coaching was optimal training for learning the MI skills. Rubak et al. (23) found that an effect of MI was not dependant on the counsellors educational background, but on other aspects such as duration of training and experience of performing MI. Gaume et al. (42) found that counsellors with better MI skills achieved better overall results and that avoidance of MI-inconsistent skills was more important than the frequency of using MI-consistent skills, concluding that assimilation of the MI spirit is of greater importance than reproducing particular MI techniques. In this study, the 25-lesson basic training course in MI was followed by supervision and coaching throughout the intervention period to monitor and improve MI skills. Even then, a large variation in number of dialogues performed presumably influenced the quality of the dialogues.

This study found that the more dialogues performed, the more positive screenings were obtained. This finding indicates that the more familiar the staff becomes with
performing motivational dialogues the better the outcome of the dialogues. Looking at the significance of the position of the staff and the outcome, there seemed to be little difference whether the motivational dialogues were performed by pedagogues, nurses or nurse assistants. Although the group of pedagogues was very small in number (two persons), the results support the conclusions by Rubak et al. (23) and Lundahl and Burke (41), who found no significant influence on outcome related to level of professional training.

Barriers towards addressing the topic of alcohol to parents have been an issue in the basic training course in MI, as well as difficulties in changing professional behaviour. These issues might influence the number and quality of the dialogues performed. Steps to further investigate this have been taken by videotaping dialogues and subsequently analysing them using the MI Treatment Integrity Manual version 3.0(43), and qualitative interviews have been conducted to assess the staff perspective (unpublished data).

Strengths and limitations of the study. The study is strengthened by the methods involved being evidence-based and validated in clinical contexts. The CAGE-C questionnaire has proven easy to use and understand by staff and by parents, even though the critics according to gender issues pointed by Bradley et al. (36) and Birath et al. (38) should be considered.

There are certain limitations in using a simple questionnaire. Very few demographic factors were obtained from the parents; gender and age. Information on social and educational background would have contributed to clarify a more detailed view of parents in risk groups and their children.

Despite the large number of parents included in this study (779 parents from 640 admissions), a large dropout of parents was detected according to the number of eligible parents from the 1384 admissions during the intervention period. Although no systematic dropouts were detected, selection bias cannot be ruled out.

It is possible that that the parents declining participation or those who were not invited to participate were those having the most severe alcohol problems. In that case, our results underestimate the real problem.

A group of parents were registered to enter the project, but the SBI was not accomplished. The staff was asked to state the reason for not accomplishing the SBI and qualitative analysis showed a variety of reasons such as Parents not present (291), Business (156), Parents refuse due to topic (18), Parents want to go home (<10) etc.

Length of admission was an important explanatory factor to dropouts, as 52.3% of admissions lasted <24 hours and 77.3% of this group (597 admissions) were never included in the study. The short admissions left little time for the staff to inform about the project and to accomplish the dialogues. The trend reveals that the longer admissions, the more dialogues were accomplished.

Conclusions and implications for further research

A widespread focus including the parents’ life style habits is necessary. The statistical analysis revealed two significant risk factors, drinking alcohol outside mealtimes on weekdays and drinking alcohol 4 days a week or more.

By implementing SBI in paediatric hospital settings, the health staff obtains information on parents’ drinking habits and an opportunity to intervene at an early stage. By reducing alcohol consumption among people with risky alcohol behaviour or relatively mild alcohol problems, a potential of breaking the continuum of excessive use of alcohol leading to dependency is possible.

Brief intervention using the methods CAGE-C and MI has proved to be adequate tools to approach parents in a motivational and respectful manner, as most parents accepted and welcomed initiatives regarding their own alcohol consumption patterns.

The number of parents (11%, N = 779) identified as having excessive behaviour regarding alcohol consumption underpins the need for health promotion and preventive initiatives in paediatric hospital settings. The discussions indicate that approach according to gender needs further investigation and should be considered when screenings involve sensitive topics.

This study shows that health promotion and preventive initiatives in the clinical practice can be undertaken by any clinical staff member, providing staff members are supported by adequate training and supervision of their skills.

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Author contributions

Lene Bjerregaard was responsible for the study design, data collection, data analysis and drafting of the manuscript. Oke Gerke supervised the data analysis and provided statistical expertise and critical revision of the manuscript. Sune Rubak, Arne Høst and Lis Wagner supervised the study and contributed with critical revision of the manuscript.

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