EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS AMONG ADOLESCENT SMOKERS AND THEIR HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract. We carried out a cross-sectional study to detect emotional and behavioral problems among adolescents who smoke and their help-seeking behavior. This study was conducted in Sarawak, East Malaysia, between July and September 2006. Emotional and behavioral problems were measured using the Youth Self-Report (YSR/11-18) questionnaire; help seeking behavior was assessed using a help-seeking questionnaire. Three hundred ninety-nine students participated in the study; the smoking prevalence was 32.8%. The mean scores for emotional and behavioral problems were higher among smokers than non-smokers in all domains (internalizing, \( p=0.028 \); externalizing, \( p=0.001 \); other behavior, \( p=0.001 \)). The majority of students who smoked (94.7%) did not seek help from a primary health care provider for their emotional or behavioral problems. Common barriers to help-seeking were: the perception their problems were trivial (60.3%) and the preference to solve problems on their own (45.8%). Our findings suggest adolescent smokers in Sarawak, East Malaysia were more likely to break rules, exhibit aggressive behavior and have somatic complaints than non-smoking adolescents. Adolescent smokers preferred to seek help for their problems from informal sources. Physicians treating adolescents should inquire about smoking habits, emotional and behavioral problems and offer counseling if required.

Keywords: adolescent smokers, emotional, behavioral problems, help-seeking