Alcohol, Drugs and Driving in 21. Century Iceland

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AIM: To take a retrospective look at results from blood samples from Icelandic drivers measured for alcohol and drugs in our laboratory from 2001 to 2006.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: The study material includes all blood samples submitted by police authorities to our laboratory for analysis of alcohol and drugs over the last 6 years. The total number of samples was 12,270. Alcohol was measured in all samples and drugs were analysed in 568 (4.6%). Drug analysis was done as requested by the police and in some cases that limits the number of drugs reported.

RESULTS: 10,362 (84.5%) of samples were over the legal limit for blood alcohol (0.5%). The results show a marked increase in the number of samples submitted for drug analysis, specially in the years 2004-2006. A majority of the samples analysed for drugs were under the legal limit for alcohol. More than one drug was analysed in many cases and on average there are reported 1.58 drugs per blood sample. Over the study period the most common drugs analysed were benzodiazepines (285 or 50%), amphetamines (272 or 48%) and tetrahydrocannabinol (153 or 27%). In 2006 there were 114 (60%) samples positive for amphetamines, 66 (35%) samples positive for benzodiazepines and 54 (29%) positive for THC.

DISCUSSION: In Iceland now there are 1.5 inhabitants per car. Statistics for traffic deaths in 2006 show that driving under the influence of alcohol was found to be a cause in 25% of the cases. Driving under the influence of drugs seems to be an expanding problem in Iceland. In 2006 a zero tolerance limit for illicit substances in blood and/or urine was introduced in Icelandic traffic law. Our results indicate that the abuse population in Iceland uses a mixture of illegal substances and prescription drugs. Last years increase in the number of drivers positive for amphetamines in blood fits with an increase in amphetamine abuse reported by drug treatment facilities in Iceland. Amphetamine was also the most common illegal substance seized by police and customs last year.

CONCLUSIONS: The number of cases of suspected drivers under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs is of major concern. The effects of the recent change in Icelandic traffic law regarding illegal substances and driving on this problem will be seen in the near future.

Keywords: Alcohol, Drugs, Drivers