Problematising survey measures of harms and risks of illicit drug use

KERSTIN STENIUS

IN A RECENT ISSUE OF THIS JOURNAL (4/2010), the benefits and problems of measuring the social costs of alcohol to society were discussed from several viewpoints. While most authors agreed on the increasing political demand for monetary estimations of the societal costs of substance use, they also brought to the fore the risks of inflated and/or meaningless quantifications.

One aspect that was raised by, for example, Hans Melberg (2010) and Esa Österberg (2010) was that cost or cost-benefit estimates rely on comparisons of two or more options. Sometimes these calculations compare imagined future situations, sometimes past social experiences. In both cases it is important for a valid estimate that the calculations are based on realistic choices. A world without illicit drugs is not realistic without very heavy policing and control measures, says Melberg (ibid). This basic condition must be included when calculating the economic costs of drug use as compared to a world with no such use. Österberg (ibid) is sceptical about calculations of alcohol or drug-related cost-of-illness or societal cost studies, since they discuss political questions about values in seemingly neutral and technical terms, but can accept cost-benefit analyses comparing specific and realistic measures.

The article by Hans Melberg and his colleagues in this issue, “Measuring the harm of illicit drug use on friends and family”, can be regarded as continuing the discussion about valid or realistic measures of societal costs. The article tackles the field by looking at calculations of harms to others based on survey data. Harm to others is a topical question in the addiction field. The Kettil Bruun Society for social and epidemiological research on alcohol, for instance, took an initiative this year to do a comparative study of harms to others. And as the authors note, a calculation of the burden to society of various substance use that leaves out the effects on family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc. misses a large share of the social burden of addictions.

The article by Melberg et al. presents a study based on a population survey in four Nordic capitals where the respondents were asked to estimate, in several different ways, the perceived harm to them caused by the use of illicit drugs by other persons (close or well-known to them). The aim was to find how many were affected by others’ drug use and in what ways. The authors also wanted to analyse whether the experienced harm could be summarised into
one quantitative measure that could potentially be expressed in terms of euros.

The article presents many intriguing results, several of them based on the possibilities to compare the answers from the four sites and different subgroups of respondents with a more specific subset of questions. Such systematic comparison leads to a more realistic yet also a more complicated picture.

About one fourth of the population in the Nordic capitals are aware of or are worried about other persons’ drug use, and 10% of them have experienced serious harm. Illicit drug use is thus a grave social problem. When comparing the Nordic capitals, we find that the extent of concern about drug use is related to the prevalence of drug use in recent history in the different capitals. Also, the fewer personal experiences respondents have of drug use in their own environment, the greater their fear of drug use.

This study also aimed at analysing the possibility of reaching a monetary estimate of the costs of illicit drug use for others. The respondents were asked to estimate how much they would be willing to pay for the treatment of a drug problem of family and friends. The variations in the reported willingness to pay for children and friends, for instance, led the authors to conclude that a calculation of the total societal costs based on a willingness to pay for treatment involves extremely complicated mathematics. It also contains the serious uncertainty of the difference between reported and actual willingness to pay.

The authors conclude that a measure of harms in terms of money, based on a population survey, is neither necessarily very valid nor very reliable. To grade the experienced problems or harms in general terms on a simple scale from 0 to 10, for example, may be more meaningful.

In his text on the measurement of risk assessment of illicit drug use, Patrik Karlsson deals with related measurement problems. He discusses the difficulties of formulating good survey questions about the risk assessment of illicit drug use. Such assessments are done fairly rarely and are connected with high risk estimates. He notes that risk assessments tend to be based on feelings rather than rational considerations. It is also clear that risk perceptions vary according to how much experience one has of the risky behaviour. The risk perception of experienced users is differentiated. For persons who have used illicit drugs, general questions about use and risks will be more or less meaningless, while the inexperienced will find it impossible to answer more detailed questions about risks with specific drugs or uses in a valid way. The challenge for the researcher is to tailor the survey questions so that research can give an adequate picture of the risk assessment of the entire population.

Both researchers and politicians would be happy to identify a simple set of survey questions that could be summarised into reliable and valid (quantitative) total measures of harms/societal costs and risk perceptions. But it seems that we will all have to live with the complicated – and rich – reality.