

Alcohol 'as harmful as smoking'

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.med.cardiology/2005-02/0135.html>

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Date: 02/04/05

Date: 3 Feb 2005 21:07:30 -0800

"Alcohol 'as harmful as smoking'", BBC News, February 4, 2005,

Link: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4232703.stm>

Alcohol causes almost as many deaths and disabilities globally as smoking or high blood pressure, researchers warn.

An international team of scientists, writing in the Lancet, point out alcohol is a factor in about 60 different diseases.

The researchers found 4% of the global burden of disease is attributable to alcohol, compared to 4.1% to tobacco and 4.4% to high blood pressure.

And they said that increasing alcohol prices in the UK could cut deaths.

The scientists were critical of the UK, saying that it had not implemented effective alcohol control policies.

The UK is about to introduce legislation allowing 24-hour drinking from later this year.

Professor Robin Room, of the Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs at Stockholm University, is one of the lead authors of the study.

He told the BBC: "The evidence we have is that if you increase the drinking hours then you get more trouble with alcohol."

He said the potential effects on health were not taken into account when changes to licensing laws were considered. "It's a very short-sighted approach."

'Little effect'

The report looks at diseases including cancers of the mouth, liver and breast, heart disease and stroke, and cirrhosis in which alcohol can play a role.

It also highlights the role of alcohol in car accidents, drownings, falls and poisonings. Alcohol is also linked to a proportion of self-inflicted injuries and murders.

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Using data on alcohol cost and UK alcohol related mortality information, the researchers estimate that increasing the price of alcohol by 10% would produce a 7% drop in deaths from cirrhosis of the liver in men and an 8.3% drop in deaths in women.

Restricting the availability of alcohol by reducing the hours pubs and shops can sell it would also affect rates of alcohol-related harm.

Professor Room criticised the emphasis of the UK's alcohol strategy, published in March last year.

"It emphasises measures that really have very little effect. The emphasis is on public information and education. There's not much on taxes."

He added: "A stark discrepancy exists between research findings about the effectiveness of alcohol control measures and the policy options considered by most governments.

"In many places, the interests of the alcohol industry have effectively exercised a veto over policies, making sure that the main emphasis is on ineffective strategies such as education."

'Sensible drinking'

Professor Ian Gilmore, chairman of the Royal College of Physicians' alcohol committee, said: "There has been very little relevant research in this country, so we don't know why we drink the way we do and how we could change the culture."

He said the health impact of alcohol had to be addressed by the government.

"It's easier to demonise the yobs – 'other people'. But 25% of the population are drinking at a potentially hazardous level. And three million people are dependent on alcohol."

The British Medical Association said the government was too slow at tackling public health concerns, such as alcohol abuse.

A Department of Health spokesperson said: "The government is working with the drinks industry, police and health professionals to increase awareness of the dangers of excessive drinking and make the sensible

drinking message easier to understand.

"This is a central focus of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy which clearly sets our plans to tackle issues around the potential harm of alcohol and anti-social behaviour linked to excessive drinking."

She added: "We have no evidence to suggest that flexible licensing hours in the UK will, in fact, lead to increased consumption of alcohol. Indeed in many countries that have more liberal licensing hours, binge drinking is far less frequent."

Mark Hastings, of the British Beer and Pub Association, said: "There are huge flaws in this theory."

"No one is saying let's double the price of food to tackle obesity."