

Sensible drinking

Bruce Ritson

The government's interdepartmental group report on the scientific and medical evidence on the health effects of alcohol was published in December 1995 (DOH, 1995).

The report contains a review of current evidence including our own (Joint Working Group, 1995). Surprisingly it concluded that regular drinking of up to between 3 and 4 units a day for men and up to between 2 and 3 units for women represented a sensible "benchmark". However, consistently drinking 4 or more units daily for men (and 3 or more for women) is not advisable because of the progressive health risk it carries. Many patients as well as the media and some politicians have been confused by this somewhat oracular message (the semantic niceties between "regular" and "consistent" for example) and have interpreted it as grounds for "drinking up".

It is acknowledged that alcohol confers health benefits by reducing heart disease mortality and morbidity in men over 40 and post-menopausal women, but these benefits can be achieved by drinking as little as one unit of alcohol a day. Consumption above 2 units per day does not appear to give additional health benefits. The report also suggests that "older" people who abstain or drink alcohol infrequently may wish to consider the possibility that light drinking might benefit their health. We could find very little evidence to support this view which, if it has the consequence of increasing per capita consumption in the population, is likely to lead to increasing harm.

Epidemiologists agree that if there is an increase in the mean population level of alcohol use, then this will lead to an increase in the

prevalence of heavy drinking. Changing the guidelines for individuals may well result in net harm to the population. The report acknowledges this but seems to feel that this theory may not apply to the UK.

The good things in the report include the new focus on pattern drinking. It stresses the dangers of intoxication and suggests that it is unwise for men to drink more than 3 or 4 units of alcohol in any one day and women 2 or 3. We are pleased that the report has emphasised that more attention should be paid to the short-term effects of drinking alcohol: the consequences of intoxication on accidents, crime and health, and has reaffirmed that pregnant women or those hoping to become pregnant should not drink more than one or two units of alcohol once or twice a week.

In the present state of confusion we can see no grounds for changing the current guidelines as far as weekly consumption is concerned. We await with interest the way in which the Health Education Authority interprets the government's report, and hope that it does so in a way that is consistent with current research evidence.

References

- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (1995) *Sensible Drinking. Report of an Inter-departmental Working Group*. London: DOH.
- JOINT WORKING GROUP OF THE ROYAL COLLEGES OF PHYSICIANS, PSYCHIATRISTS AND GENERAL PRACTITIONERS (1995) *Alcohol and the Heart in Perspective: Sensible Limits*. London: Royal Colleges.

BRUCE RITSON
*Substance Misuse Section,
 Royal College of Psychiatrists*