Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol-Related Problems

Opening speech by
the General Chairman for the Technical Discussions

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La Consommation d'Alcool et les Problèmes Liés à l'Alcool

Discours d'Ouverture du
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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization, conscious of the urgent need for further serious action concerning problems of alcohol consumption, which have of late been wreaking alarming havoc throughout the world in general and in the developing countries in particular, seriously affecting human health and undermining the colossal efforts deployed for social and economic development in different countries of the world; inspired, too, by the lofty principles and values on which WHO was founded, aiming to provide health and wellbeing to everyone in this world, has sounded the alarm to awaken humanity to the serious hazards of alcohol-related problems.

It has decided to devote the Technical Discussions during its Thirty-fifth World Health Assembly to alcohol-related problems, in order to seek effective solutions to spare humanity their disastrous consequences.

I should like to refer in this connexion to the relevant resolutions of the World Health Assembly, particularly resolutions WHA28.81 and WHA28.84 of the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly, and resolution WHA32.40 of the Thirty-second World Health Assembly, recognizing that problems related to alcohol rank among the world's major public health problems, and that their health, social and economic consequences constitute serious hazards for human health, welfare and life.

We all extend our thanks to WHO for the initiative taken in tackling the issue at this particular time, before it deteriorates into a more complex and insoluble problem.

Historical overview

It is indispensable, at the outset, to allude briefly to the historical origin of the problem. The relationship between man and alcohol is as old as history. It was limited at the beginning, however, to drinking wine on social occasions such as holidays and feasts. Man was not the regular drinker he has regrettably become today. Alcohol production was merely a small-scale industry, but soon it became a leading manufacturing industry, with mass production and flooding of world markets.

Advertising agencies applied all their ingenuity to designing fancy packaging and pretty, decorative bottles, so as to tempt people into acquiring them even if they had never tasted alcohol before. Bars and pubs became ubiquitous in tourist and recreation establishments, so that alcohol became accessible to all, at all times.

Thus hazards related to alcohol consumption were limited at the beginning, but have now become widespread and unconfined.

Yet all legal codes and divine religions have tried to curb alcohol consumption and avert its harmful effects on man.

Some 25 centuries ago Plato called for a law prohibiting alcohol consumption by the soldier on active service, the judge in his judicial capacity, and the head of state during his term of office.
In ancient Indian religions, use of inebriants was considered a major vice. To this day Buddhists abstain from alcohol.

All divine religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, warned against the harmful effects of alcohol and prohibited its consumption in one way or another. I am certain, and I think you will agree with me, that irrespective of the different forms of prohibition, all religions are at one in exalting man. They seek to raise him from vice and sin, foremost among which is alcoholism because it defiles this glorious image. Inspired by such precepts we find, for example, certain Christian churches considering total abstinence from alcohol as a precondition of faith.

Islam, the ultimate divine message, proscribed alcohol by stages, the last of which was total abolition. Thus spoke God Almighty in the Holy Koran: "Intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination of Satan's handiwork; abstain from such (abomination) that you may prosper". Such is His word.

The rationale behind the ban on alcohol consumption by the divine religions is to preserve man in his finest image, with his mind and faculties intact, which is an essential precondition of faith in any divine message. Alcohol deprives man of his reason, alienating him from right conduct. Alcohol causes disease and leads to poverty and indigence, whereas it pleases God Almighty to see His servant and successor on Earth manifesting His grace at its best.

Ever since alcoholic beverages became known, and their harmful effects recognized, social reformers have played a major role in raising consciousness among people and warning them against the serious consequences of alcohol consumption.

Dimensions of the problem in our world today

As I said a while ago, the problem has become rampant in our times, with the spread of the drinking habit throughout the world. Its prevalence has been prompted by many factors, including:

1. Increased alcohol production and the introduction of the alcoholic drink industry into international investment markets.

2. Accessibility to all through price concessions of various kinds. Alcohol is available, at reduced prices, in free zones of international airports and international means of transport.

3. Resort to the most sophisticated methods of advertising in order to tempt people of all walks of life to consume alcohol.

4. Spread of mass drinking to new categories of people such as the young and women.

5. Lack of effective social, religious, cultural and legal restraints to contain this problem.

The analysis which follows will give an idea of the dimensions of the problem.

I. Health aspects

Studies and research prove beyond any doubt that alcohol consumption is a major factor in the incidence of many serious diseases. Foremost among these are liver cirrhosis, which is among the five leading causes of death according to WHO, pancreatitis, certain heart diseases and cancer. Alcohol greatly reduces human resistance to infection. Moreover, its consumption is correlated with the incidence of tuberculosis. It has been found that alcohol consumption among women is associated with stunted growth of their babies and with foetal malformation. The alcohol habit leads to alcoholism, which is a problem in itself, not to speak of the hallucinations, brain damage and other acute mental disorders to which it may lead.
Statistics show that almost 50% of beds in mental hospitals in the majority of countries are occupied by victims of alcohol consumption. Their numbers in general hospitals range between 25% and 45%.

Statistics showed a threefold rise in the number of hospitalizations in Brazil due to alcoholism between 1960 and 1970. In Chile 30% of the health services budget is spent on medical care of alcoholics.

In Yugoslavia, the first diagnosis in 50% of all male cases admitted to psychiatric hospitals in 1972 was "alcoholism".

In France and in England and Wales diagnosed cases of alcoholism and alcoholic psychoses have increased 20-fold over the last 25 years. In Sri Lanka, the contribution of alcoholic cirrhosis to total cirrhosis figures rose from 24% in 1948 to 55% in 1968. In Alaska, mortality rates due to cirrhosis increased by 142% between 1959 and 1975.

Furthermore, alcohol consumption is closely correlated with traffic accidents. Mortality rates in traffic accidents among alcohol consumers account for nearly 50% of the total in industrial countries, and the rates are on the increase in other countries. Again, a close correlation has been established between alcohol consumption and accidents in factories, homes, etc.

It becomes clear from the above that alcohol consumption constitutes a heavy burden on health services throughout the world in general, and in developing countries in particular. This very often leads to lack of coverage by essential health services, as well as involving the State in heavy expenditure for the treatment of these cases, as will be seen in the discussion of the social aspects of the problem.

II. Social aspects

We have all no doubt witnessed the social problems engendered by alcohol consumption and addiction, which lead to conflicts within the family and eventually to its disintegration and collapse. The family, as we know, is the pillar of society and its disintegration heralds society's downfall.

We must bear in mind that the family's income is affected when its breadwinner is an alcoholic, liable to absenteeism, loss of earnings and often of employment. This contributes seriously to family poverty and exposes children to diseases of malnutrition, which in turn lead to tragic social situations. Prominent among these are cases of divorce and separation of parents, homelessness and delinquency of children, and foetal malformation due to alcohol consumption by pregnant women, thus increasing the numbers of handicapped in the community.

There is universally acknowledged to be a close relationship between alcohol consumption on the one hand and crimes in general, and violent crimes in particular, on the other. Furthermore, alcoholics are known to be aggressive and short-tempered; they seldom have good relationships with other, sober members of the community. Statistics suggest that 50% of crimes may be directly related to alcohol consumption in general. Certain studies undertaken on the association of alcohol with violent crimes showed that it was accountable for 13-50% of rapes, 24-72% of assaults, and 28-86% of homicides. One country-wide survey indicated that drunkenness was a factor in 13% of assaults committed against children.

In this connexion it is worth mentioning that the more hedonistic a society becomes the more it indulges in alcohol drinking. Take, for example, the great Roman civilization, which had no sooner reached its apogee than it declined when society succumbed to wine-drinking and sexual pleasures. When you contemplate the ruins of Pompeii you can well imagine that the city was reserved for the pleasure and amusement of Roman soldiers, the city authorities and the rich.
As our contemporary world is succumbing to materialism, shunning spiritual, religious and ethical values, it is only natural that the individual should deviate and succumb to wine consumption and addiction, resorting to all sorts of sedative, soporific and hallucinant drugs, in the vain hope of finding consolation and escape from the constraints of this materialistic world and alleviating the spiritual privation from which the world is suffering.

III. Economic aspects

It is known that state expenditure on the treatment of health, social and psychological problems due to alcohol accounts for a large proportion of national budgets, and is unfortunately rising constantly. Of course, the problem is worse in developing countries with limited resources, where costs related to alcohol represent a heavy burden on their budgets, absorbing funds which could otherwise be spent on public health and welfare.

The cost is greater when we consider that treatment of the alcoholic is not simple and absorbs a lot of effort, moral and material. Moreover, these efforts often fail, and need to be repeated again and again, thus increasing the burden on the budgets of developing countries.

As the alcohol phenomenon is relatively recent in developing countries, the treatment of increasing numbers of cases in the future will absorb a larger share of the health services budgets in these countries.

Were we able to save the amounts spent by the family breadwinner on alcohol, and provide instead food, clothing, education and care for his family, we should be able to bring welfare and wellbeing to many people in this world, wiping out poverty and indigence.

I wish to underline in particular the cost of health services necessitated by alcohol problems, which in certain cases amounts to nearly 50% of the total cost of the State health services.

How much more useful it would be to save this expenditure and devote it to other health activities needed by the community?

Having reviewed the health, social and economic aspects of the problem, we may wonder why the problem has worsened so alarmingly in modern times? The answer is, as we have already said, that alcohol consumption is no longer exclusively associated as it used to be with social occasions, holidays and feasts. It has now become part of the individual's life, consumed regularly. Taverns and bars are everywhere, offering every temptation to induce people to spend long hours in them, and they are usually open day and night to receive alcohol victims.

People nowadays are avid to consume more and more alcohol, due to rising prosperity, particularly in advanced societies. Add to this the fact that contemporary man suffers from anxiety and spiritual emptiness, psychological problems and social disorders, all driving him to various means of alleviating this intense anxiety.

Advertising media, lavishly financed by alcohol manufacturers, try to persuade young people and women that alcohol is synonymous with culture, civilization and progress. He who does not drink is under-developed and uncivilized. Moreover, alcohol is often associated with sex and sensual pleasures, thus enticing many people along this perilous path, heedless of the consequences.

History teaches us that since the human race began, the more serious-minded a society has been, seeking to achieve well-defined objectives, the better it has been: more productive, less indulgent in lustful pleasures, less prone to alcohol - this scourge which deprives man of his reason, affecting his behaviour and limiting his productivity.

Thus, during wars we observe a decrease in alcohol consumption in the belligerent states. Statistics show a decrease in cases of cirrhosis during wars, commensurate with the reduction in alcohol consumption. In time of war man has no leisure for amusements and drinking, as he is busy with serious fighting and warlike action.
It has also become a feature of modern times to offer alcoholic beverages on all occasions, such as feasts and banquets, as an essential part of these functions. Most regrettably, drinking alcohol and ensuring its availability to guests has become in people's minds a cultural status symbol.

Situation in developing countries

I particularly wish to lay emphasis on the dimensions of the problem in developing countries. The prevalence of alcohol consumption in developing societies is especially serious in view of their limited financial resources, and the importance of providing their peoples with everything needed to promote progress, and hence of avoiding everything that will damage their economies, weaken their capacities and lead to the disintegration and collapse of their societies. Among the main obstacles to their progress is the prevalence of alcohol consumption.

There is no doubt that the spread of alcohol consumption in these countries tends eventually to weaken their social, health and economic structures.

Knowing that the cost of alcohol in developing countries accounts for an appreciable proportion of their budgets, we realize that it would be more worth while to divert this expenditure to health, education and similar services, bringing more welfare and progress to their peoples.

It is really disheartening to think of a family in a developing country, spending all its savings to provide a son with the best education, probably selling out for the purpose house and furniture and falling into debt; and when the son achieves the much longed-for success, and the family begins to reap the fruit of its investments in efforts and funds, then comes the dramatic setback, with the son falling a victim of alcohol, bringing the family to ruin, prison and destitution. The effect inevitably spills over to affect the whole of society.

Situation in developed countries

The emphasis I have laid on the serious implications of the problem in developing countries does not mean that developed countries are not affected. But the economic aspects might be less apparent in the latter, in view of their substantial resources and relative prosperity. Yet the heavy expenditure incurred in these countries for alcohol certainly yields no return and it would be more worth while to use it for other activities of social benefit.

Moreover, productivity in those countries is reduced by absenteeism due to alcoholism. Manufacturing firms get rid of this unproductive manpower, which in turn needs social assistance from the State. Thus the country both loses the productivity of these individuals and is obliged to spend funds on their families.

Such cases contribute largely to the aggravation of unemployment, a problem threatening the economies of many developed countries.

Nor can we ignore traffic accidents and others occurring in factories and houses, which take a heavy toll among alcohol drinkers, depriving the country of competent and qualified manpower in different sectors, the majority of victims unfortunately being young, active contributors to the national economy.

Solutions proposed for alcohol problems

If we are to find solutions to alcohol problems, it is imperative to seek in the first place means of enhancing people's awareness of the harmful effects of alcohol, so as to motivate them to abstinence in the light of knowledge and recognition of its hazards and consequences.
The initiative taken by WHO in warning humanity against alcohol-related problems was a major pioneer step, as it acquaints the individual with the dimensions of the problem. This is the first important stage in tackling the problem. It is the first time that the Organization has taken this serious, active and decisive attitude towards the matter.

Our plan to contain the alcohol problem would necessarily be carried out gradually, in several stages, on the understanding that its ultimate objective is complete abolition, to spare humanity the hazards of alcohol.

It would be appropriate, in this connexion, to draw upon the experience of Islam, the last divine message, in the abolition of alcohol. Islam did not prohibit wine-drinking overnight, but gradually, in several stages spread out over 14 years, during which our prophet, Mohammad - God bless him and grant him salvation - deployed gigantic efforts. He began by preparing man to accept God's order to abolish wine, by building up faith in the minds of Moslems and preparing them to accept God's will. We can imagine how difficult this mission was for our eminent prophet when we realize that he was entrusted with the message in a society which indulged in wine-drinking, lustful pleasures and wanton distractions. His mission, I say, was difficult; his message was one of welfare and divine guidance. His message was to guide man to worship God alone, to follow the straight path and to avoid all that is harmful to himself.

First the prophet told the faithful not to pray when intoxicated. It was the first reference to prepare the mind for realization of the disadvantages of wine. He continued advocating the limitation of wine drinking, until God ordered its abolition in the Holy Koran, at the final stage when He said: "Intoxicants and gambling (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination, of Satan's handiwork; abstain from such (abomination) that you may prosper".

Let us look to the experience of Islam, in its progressive abolition of alcohol some 14 centuries ago, for an example to be followed in our plan to tackle the alcohol problem in our time. Let us proceed gradually, by stages, especially as the experience of many States through history is that legislation and severe punishment has not achieved the desired objective. Legislation does not solve the problem; what is needed is to educate people and prepare them mentally to accept abstinence from alcohol out of sound conviction and faith proof against all temptation.

In my opinion, the main priority measures should include the following:

I. Unanimous agreement that alcohol consumption is harmful to health, and concerted action to get rid of this bad habit.

II. Creation of awareness, through the mass media, among all categories of people to warn them against the hazards of alcohol, with particular emphasis on the younger generation, our hope for a brighter future. Special programmes should be developed at every school level, from kindergarten all the way to the University. Awareness programmes on alcohol should be goal-oriented and interesting at the same time. They should not include any intimidating, frightening or threatening material so as to encourage the participation of all categories of people. Nor should we forget, in these educational programmes, to guide mothers, informing them that alcohol is detrimental to the growth of their children and could cause malformation, and to highlight the conclusions of studies and surveys carried out in this field.

III. Restriction of the number of factories producing alcoholic beverages, reduction of the percentage of alcohol in their products and tightening of control measures as well as control of marketing practices.

IV. Restriction of drinking hours in bars and taverns to the minimum possible, as is the practice in many countries, and raising of the permitted age for entering such establishments to 21 years instead of 18.
V. Restriction of the advertising of alcoholic beverages, and inclusion of a warning as to the health hazards of alcohol and its consequences for family and society.

VI. Restriction of the promotion, through price concessions, of alcoholic beverages in airports, free zones and means of transport.

VII. A request to hotels and public establishments that they provide and promote non-alcoholic beverages, advertising them in the same way as they do alcoholic beverages now, and provide special areas reserved for consumers of non-alcoholic beverages.

VIII. Holding of seminars and meetings at national, regional and international levels to highlight the health, social and economic aspects of the hazards of alcohol consumption, with the participation of religious leaders, medical personnel, social reformers and other eminent thinkers.

IX. Promotion of slogans calling for abolition of alcohol in the programmes of political parties throughout the world, as in the case of breast-feeding which was advocated in the programmes of political parties in many States, despite the hostile attitude of companies producing artificial milk towards this WHO-sponsored project.

It is worth mentioning here the intensive campaigns conducted by cigarette manufacturers against the resounding appeals for smoking control, demonstrating how far they are prepared to go in order to corrupt and undermine society. I look forward to the day when the programmes of political parties will include plans to rid society of these harmful afflictions.

These are some of the ideas I wanted to put before you with a view to containing alcohol-related problems.

I should, however, like to stress once more the imperative need to seek effective means of tackling these problems in view of their serious consequences in a world suffering from lack of qualified manpower, from unemployment and from scarcity of financial resources—a world striving for construction and progress, not destruction and backwardness.

Nothing is more destructive to our societies than alcohol. The WHO initiative should therefore be considered as an alarm and a warning to the whole of human society. We must initiate action to confront this problem in real earnest and with real effectiveness. An important first step would be to ban alcohol production in areas where it does not exist, and limit its expansion where it already does, until the day comes when it will be possible to put a final stop to this industry so as to safeguard the integrity of our societies and protect the individual, affording him conditions and facilities conducive to productivity and serious work.

Distinguished brothers and sisters, once again I salute, on your behalf, the World Health Organization for its commendable initiative. You have before you the relevant document prepared by the Organization. I invite the working groups to discuss the items in this document on alcohol-related problems. I am hopeful that you will put forward appropriate recommendations for solving these problems, which we will be discussing again together, hoping to arrive at resolutions and recommendations for decisive action to rid humanity of alcohol hazards.

The most important decision we are taking in our meeting today is to initiate action, proclaiming it openly and resoundingly to all the peoples of the world in this Thirty-fifth World Health Assembly of our Organization, which was created to ensure health and wellbeing for man everywhere in this world.
We declare that alcohol consumption is a serious problem which threatens health, the family and human society. We must initiate action to get rid of this affliction, to emancipate our minds and bodies, to purify our souls, in order to lead a decent life, cherishing ethical values, to build a better society, to lead a productive life and to ensure the welfare of humanity.

Last but not least, I implore God Almighty to guide us all towards the good of our peoples, to provide health and wellbeing for everyone on this earth.