Alcohol and disease

Drinking alcohol, the most widely used psychoactive drug in the world, can be a pleasure, but unless the amounts taken by regular drinkers are carefully limited many of the body's vital organs are at risk. When some of these are damaged seriously enough by the daily intake of alcohol over a number of years, the health and even the life of the drinker is threatened, warns WHO in one of a series of information sheets on alcohol misuse, prepared in collaboration with the UK's Health Education Authority.

Worldwide, the amount of alcohol-related illness puts a considerable strain on national health budgets and uses up funds which are badly needed to prevent and cure other diseases. One out of every three hospital beds in some European countries is occupied by a patient with a drink-related disease, and in developing countries sickness caused by drink is growing. In one generation's time they will catch up with, or even exceed, the present per capita alcohol consumption in developed nations, if their consumption continues to rise at current levels. The natural outcome is likely to be a higher incidence of alcohol-related problems, and a further substantial drain on scarce economic and social resources.

Regular drinking can damage any of the organs of the body except the bladder and lungs. The brain, nerves, liver, muscles, kidney, heart, pancreas, sex organs, gutlet, stomach, and bowel are all at risk. After heart disease and cancer, alcoholic liver disease (cirrhosis of the liver) is now the chief cause of death among middle-aged men in many developed countries. The chances of survival depend on how soon the sickness is caught.

The brain, which when you drink is literally bathed in alcohol, is now being found by medical experts to function less well in the case of heavy drinkers. One result can be difficulty in walking properly and controlling the muscles. In addition, alcohol is of course a depressant, and drinkers who experience deep depressions often commit suicide.

The digestive system is also a prime target of alcohol, and scientists have discovered it is involved in cancer of the mouth, throat and gullet, which since 1950 has been an increasing cause of death. One reason why heavy drinkers die earlier than other people is high blood pressure, caused by the effects of alcohol. There is also damage to their heart muscles which prevents the heart from pumping effectively.

The sex drive in men may be harmed by too much drinking. Sex hormone levels fall, leading to less interest in sex and a reduced ability to make love, or even impotence. Research among women has been less, but the evidence indicates that their interest also diminishes when they drink heavily.

To combat the health hazards of drinking, different approaches have been adopted from one country to another. However, the general lines agreed by experts include education, encouraging people to stay within safe limits when they drink, restricting the availability of alcohol, and imposing a tax large enough to make drink a luxury. Ultimately, the responsibility rests with each one of us, aware that the less we drink, the better it is for our bodies.

One after another for the vaccine!

These sprightly drawings form part of an immunization programme run by the provincial government of Navarre, in northern Spain. The aim of the programme is not only to protect infants and school-age children from five of the six childhood diseases which figure in WHO's Expanded Programme on Immunization (tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough, polio and measles) but also against mumps and German measles. Adults too will benefit from the programme, since it will extend to soldiers, industrial workers, pregnant women, and so on.

The eventual targets are to keep the incidence of polio, neonatal tetanus and diphtheria down at zero, in the space of five years to eliminate endemic cases of measles, and to wipe out congenital German measles over the next ten years. Navarre Province hopes by 1990 to give full vaccination protection to 95 per cent of children under one year of age, 90 per cent of children aged one to two years, 95 per cent of schoolchildren and 70 per cent of the adult population at risk; in addition 98 per cent of pregnant women will have the anti-tetanus vaccine.

"Immunization: a chance for every child" was the slogan chosen by WHO for World Health Day, 7 April—but of course the slogan is valid for the whole of the year 1987.

Regular drinking can damage any of the organs of the body except the bladder and lungs.

Photo WHO/HL Amenend
**New version of a working guide**


This was so successful that stocks were quickly exhausted, and a 1980 edition modified the text in the light of more information from users. It appeared in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Russian, but adaptations and translations have been published in many countries.

The new version is described as a working guide with guidelines for training and guidelines for adaptation. It includes several illustrations, larger print and an improved layout—changes that were suggested by users who had experience of using the previous editions. It is intended not only as a learning and reference tool for the community health worker but also as a guide for his or her teachers, for those in charge of primary health care programmes, and more generally, for anyone providing primary health care at family or community levels.

Crammed with easy-to-follow illustrations, "The Community Health Worker" has 460 pages and is priced at 22 Swiss francs.

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**Newsbriefs**

- **Health education award.** An annual award of US $5,000 is to be made by WHO for outstanding contributions made by individuals, institutions or non-governmental organizations towards strengthening Health Education in primary health care. The cash prize is intended to be used for continuing these health education activities, and will be accompanied by a commemorative plaque. The award has been made possible by the generosity of the US-based philanthropic association, the L.I.S. Foundation.

  Nominations for the 1987 award must reach WHO before 31 August this year, and should be addressed to: Health Education Service, Division of Public Information and Education for Health, WHO, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland. They should include the name and address of the person or institution nominated, a brief summary of the primary health care project concerned, and a description of the health education activity being carried out as part of the PHC project, emphasising the planning, implementation and evaluation phases and highlighting the innovative approaches being used and the impact of the education on people's behaviour.

  Only a health education activity still in progress will be considered for the award. The UK family of organizations and members of their staff are not eligible for nomination.

- **Emergency kit.** An emergency Immunization Kit perfected by Oxfam of the UK will enable Oxfam and other agencies to keep a stock of pre-packed kits of cold chain equipment for use in emergency areas. The kit contains all the equipment necessary to deliver 5,000 doses of vaccine—about one week's work in an epidemic-stricken or earthquake-hit region.

- **Breakthrough!** Research carried out in Bangladesh has convinced US physicians that, if your mother gave you chicken soup when you were ill—she was right! Chicken soup, like any other simple formula that contains protein, starch, salt and water, is an excellent remedy for diarrhoeal illnesses, which can be lethal because they drain the body of water and salt. Reporting this "breakthrough," the US National Council for International Health, compared such home remedies, commonly used in the Indian subcontinent, with oral rehydration salts (ORS) which are saving some half a million children's lives every year.

- **Honoured.** The Leon Bernard Foundation Prize has been awarded this year to Sir John Reid, formerly Chief Medical Officer at the Scottish Home and Health Department and now Consultant Adviser on International Health with the UK's Department of Health and Social Security. Sir John has been a member of WHO's Executive Board from 1973 to 1986, and was its Chairman at the time of the Alma-Ata Conference in 1978. Established in honour of one of the founders of the Health Organization of the League of Nations, the Leon Bernard Foundation Prize is awarded for distinguished contributions to knowledge and practice in social medicine.

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**In the next issue**

The United Nations has declared 1987 the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. The July issue of *World Health* will examine the plight of the homeless in many parts of the world, and the harmful effects that unsatisfactory housing and sanitation have on human health.