

NHS 21 units guideline "defies the evidence" says member of Royal College of Physicians

The NHS campaign that recommends that we drink no more than 21 units of alcohol (about 10 pints of 4% beer) a week is based on the theories of Ian Gilmore, President of the Royal College of Physicians.

However, a member of that same institution, Dr. Ian Gooding, told Nottingham Drinker:

"Like Gilmore, I am a gastroenterologist and see people with alcohol-related disease every working day. I am certain from my experience that the bulk of alcohol-induced disease is caused by spirits and strong cheap lagers consumed at home.

"The research to confirm this has not been done, however we do have hard evidence on the association between quantity of alcohol consumed and mortality from the British Doctors' Study,¹ which showed a U-shaped curve.

"Those who drank 18 units weekly had a markedly lower mortality than teetotallers. Above 18 units the curve slowly rises so that teetotallers had the same mortality as those who drank 63 units weekly. It has been said that the national guidelines on safe alcohol consumption were 'plucked out of the air', I would go further - they defy the evidence!

"Gilmore's proposals will lead to pub closures, increasing home drinking and social isolation (especially in rural areas) which will increase mental health problems. CAMRA needs to tackle Gilmore & Co, aware of the weakness of the evidence behind their arguments."

So what do apas, the Alcohol Problems Advisory service think of all this? Executive Director Nick Tegerdine told Nottingham Drinker:

"Re the NHS units campaign, I think the whole system is pants! So do many others, and the current campaign has been discussed this last month at the most senior level within

the Primary Care Trusts and the Crime and Drugs partnership and some felt it was not at all helpful. The current campaign is fatally flawed in so far as it provides factually inaccurate information".

"The debate gets really interesting when you compare the 'safe and sensible' limits as defined by responsible authorities in other countries.

"As a general response my line is 'if you never drink more than 21 units (14 for women), never go out in the sun, never eat anything other than organic lettuce and certainly never a rare steak and cheese made with unpasteurised milk, and never have unprotected sex you might live a bit longer but why would you want to?' If you're really lucky (and if my memory serves me correctly) you can do all of those things in the same day and survive!

"To be fair there is health evidence to do with increasing risk with increasing dose; it's fairly well regarded stuff, but there are so many other variables (pre-existing liver damage; ethnic origin; body mass, interaction with other drugs etc.). At apas, we don't worry too much about 'units and limits'. Most of our client facing staff report service users drinking at least ten times those amounts (but no one is saying that it's doing them any good, there are limits!)"

So there you have it - it seems that on 63 units a week - that is about four and a half pints a day of 4% beer - a male drinker can live as long as teetotaler! (Unfortunately I have no data for women drinkers, as the research simply has not been done.) And what's more, if you drink 18 units a week, you will actually live longer than a teetotaler! So shouldn't the NHS be telling us that we *must* drink 18 units a week in order to live longer? As we at Nottingham Drinker have always thought, *beer is good for you!*


Beer is also recognised as a rich source of Vitamin B and of antioxidants, substances believed to play a part in preventing cancer, and it has been said that it plays a part in preventing gallstone formation, osteoporosis, diabetes and stomach ulcers.²

We should, of course, ensure that our diets and exercise regimes do not allow us to become overweight due to drinking that amount - but, that withstanding, *drink to your good health!*


A final point to consider - should the NHS be spending thousands on their anti-drinking advertising campaign? Is this what our 4p. extra beer duty is being spent on? Could not the money be better spent on staff and equipment?

References:



1. Doll R, Peto R, Hall E, Wheatley K, Gray R. Mortality in relation to consumption of alcohol: 13 years' observations on male British doctors. *BMJ*. Oct. 8; 1994
2. The Benefits of Moderate Beer Consumption, *The Brewers of Europe 2004* (downloadable from www.brewersofeurope.org/docs/publications/pdf-Mei04.pdf)



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