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Problems related to alcohol consumption

Report of a WHO
Expert Committee

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**WHO EXPERT COMMITTEE ON PROBLEMS RELATED
TO ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

Geneva, 20–26 November 1979

Members

- Dr E. A. Babayan, Head of the Department of Evaluation, New Drugs and Medical Equipment, Ministry of Health of the USSR, Moscow, USSR
- Dr J. Ebie, Professor of Psychiatry, Department of Mental Health, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria (*Vice-Chairman*)
- Dr F. Y. Johnson-Romuald, Consultant in Pharmacology, Lomé, Togo
- Dr R. Jessor, Professor of Psychology and Director, Research Program on Problem Behavior, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA
- Dr R. Kendell, Professor of Psychiatry, University Department of Psychiatry, Edinburgh, Scotland (*Chairman*)
- Dr K. Mäkelä, Senior Research Scientist, Social Research Institute of Alcohol Studies, Helsinki, Finland (*Rapporteur*)
- Dr A. S. Manugian, Medical Director, Lebanon Hospital for Mental and Nervous Disorders, Beirut, Lebanon
- Dr D. Mohan, Associate Professor and Head, Department of Psychiatry, All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, India (*Rapporteur*)
- Dr W. O. Phoon, Professor and Head, Department of Social Medicine and Public Health, University of Singapore, Singapore

Representatives of other organizations

International Labour Office

Mr E. Sackstein, Vocational Rehabilitation Section, ILO, Geneva, Switzerland

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Miss N. Friderich, Chief, Section of Education concerning Problems connected with the Use of Drugs, UNESCO, Paris

International Council on Alcohol and Addictions

Mr A. Tongue, Director, ICAA, Lausanne, Switzerland

Dr E. Tongue, Assistant Director, ICAA, Lausanne, Switzerland

World Federation for Mental Health

Dr P. Fouquet, Member, French High Committee for Study and Information on Alcoholism, Paris, France

World Psychiatric Association

Dr E. Tongue, Member, Section Committee on Drug Dependency and Alcoholism, WPA, Vienna

Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc.

Dr J. Bealer, Member of the General Service Board, Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., New York, NY, USA

International Blue Cross Union

Rev. D. Rochat, Secretary, Lausanne, Switzerland

Secretariat

- Dr C. Campillo, Coordinator of the Social Sciences Area, Mexican Centre for Studies on Mental Health, Mexico (*Temporary Adviser*)
- Dr D. Hawks, Head, Department of Psychology, Whitchurch Hospital, Cardiff, Wales (*Temporary Adviser*)
- Dr H. Kono, Medical Director, National Institute on Alcoholism, Tokyo, Japan (*Temporary Adviser*)
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- Dr I. Rootman, Chief, Health Promotion Studies, Health and Welfare, Ottawa, Canada (*Temporary Adviser*)
- Dr N. Sartorius, Director, Division of Mental Health, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland
- Dr A.J. Tuyns, Unit of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, WHO, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyons, France
- Dr K. Vuylsteek, Professor of Hygiene and Social Medicine, University of Ghent, Belgium (*Temporary Adviser*)

PROBLEMS RELATED TO ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Report of a WHO Expert Committee

1. INTRODUCTION

A WHO Expert Committee on Problems related to Alcohol Consumption met in Geneva from 20 to 26 November 1979.

The meeting was opened on behalf of the Director-General by Dr N. Sartorius, Director, Division of Mental Health, who noted that a new phenomenon on the world scene is the rapid increase in the production of alcoholic beverages, their increasingly wide distribution and the more general availability of money to buy them. In many areas of the world these changes have come about while the populations are undergoing other profound sociocultural and economic upheavals. The impact of increased availability of alcohol in such situations has sometimes been disastrous. Indeed, in 1979, members of the Executive Board at its sixty-third session and delegates of numerous countries at the Thirty-second World Health Assembly confirmed that alcohol problems now rank among the world's major public health concerns (resolution WHA32.40). On the basis of evidence brought forward, the conclusion was reached that in many parts of the world alcohol problems constitute a serious obstacle to socioeconomic development and threaten to overwhelm the health services.

In the past, most programmes concerning alcohol problems focused on the individual drinker, particularly the heavy drinker, including the person who had become dependent on alcohol. In recent years, however, attention has increasingly turned to the consequences of drinking for the community, for society in general. In some countries the foremost problem seems to be fatal road accidents associated with the drinking driver or pedestrian. The long-lasting disabilities resulting from nonfatal accidents may lay an even heavier burden on the community. The effects on the development of children of neglect or ill-treatment by alcoholic parents should not be forgotten. Other matters of concern which are often associated with heavy drinking are the lowering of working capacity, absenteeism, and crime.

The main purpose of the meeting was to consider what can be done about alcohol problems on a broad scale: firstly, how far they can be

prevented; and, where preventive measures have failed, how far alcohol problems can be managed so that they cause less damage to the individual and the community.

Dr Sartorius reminded the participants that WHO's main social target is the attainment by all citizens of the world by the year 2000 of a level of health that will permit them to lead a socially and economically productive life. Stress is laid on the need for formulating policies, strategies and plans of action for achieving this goal, which the Committee was expected to keep in mind when making its recommendations on the prevention and management of alcohol problems.

Background

Thirteen years have elapsed since a WHO expert committee paid major attention to alcohol problems. A WHO Expert Committee on Mental Health, convened in 1966, considered services for the prevention and treatment of dependence on alcohol and other drugs. Its report (1) was used to support several WHO efforts at stimulating countries to study the size and nature of alcohol and other drug problems and the way in which they were being met: for instance, two interregional seminars were held in 1971 and 1972, for which participants prepared surveys of these problems in their countries (2). More recently, the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence (3), focusing its discussions particularly on prevention, considered alcohol problems among those associated with drug use.

Concern about alcohol problems began to spread and, in 1975, a resolution was adopted at the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly requesting the Director-General "to direct special attention in the future programme of WHO to the extent and seriousness of the individual, public health and social problems associated with the current use of alcohol in many countries of the world and the trend toward higher levels of consumption", and "to study in depth, on the basis of such information, what measures could be taken in order to control the increase in alcohol consumption involving danger to public health" (resolution WHA28.81).

In the meantime, work had started on two important projects consonant with this resolution. One, carried out in collaboration between the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies, the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario, substantiated its conclusion that "changes in the overall consumption of alcoholic beverages have a bearing on the health of the people in any

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