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# After sober reflection

Richard Shrubb offers his personal experience of alcohol misuse and discusses how the problem can be diminished

PUNITIVE TAXATION, public education and the recent ban on smoking in indoor public places have reduced the proportion of the UK population who smoke from about 5 per cent in 1970 to about 25 per cent today (Cancer Research UK 2011). Smoking has almost disappeared from television and cinema screens too, but the drinking of alcohol is often seen, and sometimes made to appear glamorous, in these media.

I have my own experiences of the effects of alcohol misuse. My sister knowingly drank herself to death and I had to trace our mother to a hotel in Spain to give her the terrible news. At the time, I did not feel too bad; I was drunk, and would continue to be for the next three years.

I was also unemployed. I received £40 a week and a rent allowance, which meant I could afford £1.50 each night for two tins of strong cider. Later, I received a disability allowance, and my income quadrupled. The genie leapt out of the bottle and said we should have a party. So we did, and I nearly killed myself.

Sobriety came to me, not because I realised I was destroying my liver, but because I realised I had a choice: continue drinking or study for a master's degree. I chose the latter and have been sober for more than six years.

Alcohol abuse costs the NHS billions of pounds each year. It affects nurses

across the profession, from those in emergency departments and sexual health clinics to those in organ transplant wards and mental health units; every nurse has to deal with an alcohol-related issue at some point in their careers.

How can this be achieved? Clearly, prohibition does not work, as the roaring global trade in illegal drugs shows. In Scandinavian countries, however, some progress has been made in reducing alcohol consumption by controlling its sale.

## Limiting availability

In 2002, the Nordic Council for Alcohol (2002) published a report on Nordic alcohol policy, which found that alcohol restriction and punitive taxation reduce consumption among problem drinkers, while enabling others to continue to drink alcohol in moderate amounts.

The report summary states: 'When availability of alcohol is radically limited, the heavy drinker seems to be quite strongly affected, whereas the majority report only small effects.'

In Norway, a scheme was begun in which alcohol was sold only through state-owned shops. This led to industrial action, including a strike. According to the report, the strike led to reductions in domestic disturbances and alcohol-related crimes decreased, and in the numbers

of alcohol-related arrests and detox admissions among hardened drinkers. Moderate drinkers, however, were reportedly hardly affected.

The report also suggests that punitive taxation can reduce harm from alcohol misuse: 'In Finland, taxes on alcohol were raised in 1975 in order to slow down the rate of alcohol consumption. This had increased between 1969 and 1974 by 8 per cent per year. In 1975, real prices were raised by 10 per cent. The increase in consumption stopped so that, in 1975, it was 5 per cent lower than in 1974.'

## Cultural change

In the UK, however, the answer to reducing problem drinking may lie, not in restricting supply and raising taxes, but in changing the culture. Smoking has long been regarded as a 'coming of age' experience and a source of pleasure in later life. However, since smokers can no longer enjoy a cigarette with a pint of beer by the pub fireplace on a winter's night, but must huddle together in the doorway outside, the smoking experience has lost much of its charm.

Similarly, in some parts of the country, men are not regarded as 'real' men unless they can hold ten pints, an assumption that surely needs to be changed.

But there may be another reason why prohibition will not be introduced in this country. Four hundred years ago, coffee shops were introduced into England, and King Charles I became worried. Coffee was thought to sharpen the minds of the chattering classes so the king sought to ban the shops in which it was sold. He failed, and was soon overthrown by the alert and sober puritans.

Perhaps in this episode the true fear of the government is revealed: it does not want to reduce alcohol consumption too much for fear that a more sober people will take a greater interest in politics...

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## Reference

Cancer Research UK (2011) *Smoking. Statistics*. <http://tiny.cc/uth11> (last accessed: March 31 2011.)

Nordic Council for Alcohol (2002) *The Effects of Nordic Alcohol Policies*. <http://tinyurl.com/nordicdrinks> (last accessed: March 31 2011.)