SCOTLAND AND ALCOHOL: THE GATHERING STORM

Scotland and alcohol have long gone together. Consequently, Scotland has many slang terms for someone being drunk—’bevvied’, ‘blitzed’, ‘blootered’, ‘fleeing’, ‘gassed’, ‘guttered’, ‘half-cut’, ‘hammered’, ‘kipped’, ‘miroculous’, ‘paralytic’, ‘pickled’, ‘smashed’, ‘steaming’, ‘stoating’, ‘stocious’, ‘totalled’, ‘wasted’ and ‘wrecked’ to name just a few. And these are separate from the euphemisms often employed to describe someone who is drunk such as ‘happy’, ‘merry’ and ‘relaxed’. This demonstrates two things. First, that the English language is versatile. Second, the fact that Scotland (like the rest of the UK) has many words to describe being drunk is indicative of the central role alcohol plays in society. It could almost be said that this is analogous to Inuit culture which has scores of terms to describe the word ‘snow’, which underlines its centrality to Inuit life.

Scotland is, of course, home to scotch whisky (blended and malt)—drinks savoured throughout the world. Whisky is of crucial importance to the Scottish economy and forms a large proportion of Scottish exports, which contributes notably to the UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In general, alcohol forms an essential part of socializing in Scotland, be it at a barbeque, a party, a wedding, going out for a meal, or simply going to the pub for a drink. However, the amount of alcohol that people in Scotland drink, and the way in which they tend to drink, may not be conducive to their health or safety.

In January 2006, Leon and McCambridge,1 in their study of liver cirrhosis mortality rates in Britain from 1950 to 2002, reported in the Lancet that ‘cirrhosis mortality rates in Scotland are now one of the highest in western Europe’. In Scotland, England and Wales mortality rates have risen steeply, but more so in Scotland. Between 1987–91 and 1997–2001 mortality rates of cirrhosis among men rose by 104% in Scotland and 69% in England and Wales, and among women by 46% in Scotland and 44% in England and Wales. These are truly appalling statistics and reflect an increase in alcohol consumption. For Scotland the mortality rates of cirrhosis for both men and women are now higher than those in France, which traditionally had high rates. As Scotland’s rates have risen, those in France have fallen for both genders.

If this is not bad enough, the way people drink in Scotland (and the UK) is causing deep concern. People have a greater tendency to ‘binge drinking’—that is bouts of excessive drinking. In addition, over half the 18–24-year-olds in the UK admitted to drinking with the sole intention of getting drunk.2 This approach to drinking is different from that of southern European countries such as France and Italy, which although traditionally drank more alcohol per capita, also used alcohol in a more social way. This involves using alcohol in the family setting and as an integral part of meals rather than with the sole intention of getting drunk—at least they have until now. Binge drinking means that about 20% of 18–24-year-old persons in Scotland have stated to have had problems with hangovers at their work. Binge drinking also causes problems involving drinkers (young and old, men and women) in terms of violence (fighting among one another and domestic violence), falls and head injuries, verbal abuse to passersby, vomiting and urinating in public places, and accidents such as road traffic accidents, and fires. Little surprise then that alcohol misuse is rising in political priorities.3

Last year, at the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow (RCP SG), a conference discussed Scotland’s problems with alcohol. Called ‘Scotland’s hangover—Wake up to the problem’, it brought together all the important players in preventing and treating alcohol misuse in Scotland. Those participating highlighted the importance of the conference and the need to act. Among the speakers were Professor Graham Teasdale, president of the RCP SG; Tom McCabe, Scottish deputy minister for Health and Community Care; Willie Rae, chief constable of Strathclyde Police (Scotland’s largest police force); and Sheriff Principal Gordon Nicholson QC, who chaired a review of Scotland’s alcohol licensing laws. The conclusions of the conference made sobering reading and covered the whole spectrum of issues that need to be pursued. The conference noted that to tackle alcohol misuse comprehensively and consistently a number of things needed to happen including

- Taking a multidisciplinary approach including involvement of the alcohol industry
- Having relative pricing of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks to discourage excessive drinking
- Ensuring limits on the density of licensed premises
- Ending promotions such as ‘happy hours’ which offer cheap alcohol and encourage binge drinking
- Having tougher regulation by an independent body of advertising alcohol products
- Ensuring more public education and information
- Allocating more resources for the health service to cope with the medical problems such as cirrhosis, but also problems such as alcohol-fuelled violence and domestic violence.

Readers may remember that my last Letter4 described the bold move made by the Scottish Parliament in banning smoking in enclosed spaces in Scotland. While that has been a major step forward for Scotland in reducing the morbidity and mortality related to smoking, the damage done from alcohol to the health of people in Scotland is only now coming under greater inspection.

I do not wish to be pessimistic but there is a gathering storm in Scotland. Unless we act to control alcohol misuse, the long love affair between Scotland and alcohol will become increasingly fraught and may end in tragedy.

REFERENCES
2 Anonymous. Alarm over drinkers determined to get drunk. Scotsman (Edinburgh) 1 June 2006.

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