

Chapter 1

Our continuing love affair with alcohol

Here's to alcohol, the cause of and the solution to all life's problems.

(Homer Simpson, *The Simpsons*)

IN THE BEGINNING...

There is nothing new about the issue of alcohol; the pleasures and problems that it brings have been with us for a very long time. Alcoholic drinks have been produced and consumed by humans for thousands of years. Alcohol has medicinal, antiseptic and analgesic properties. Alcoholic drinks encourage relaxation and social cohesion and have played a significant role in religion. However, the role of alcoholic drinks in society has often been highly controversial and the subject of great debate. The contradiction between alcohol as essential for pleasure and drunkenness as a social evil is found throughout world history.

Archaeological evidence suggests that as long ago as 10,000 BC, our Neolithic ancestors fermented and drank beer. Tools to produce wine, dating back to 7,000 BC, have been discovered in China. By 4,000 BC, wine had started to appear in Egyptian pictographs. The ancient Greeks wrote at length about the positive and negative effects of alcohol and many of the great philosophers had strong opinions on the subject. Plato, for example, believed, 'He was a wise man who invented beer'. He and his contemporaries were, however, strongly critical of drunkenness.

During the time of the Romans, the trade in wine and other alcoholic beverages grew rapidly across the Empire. Every villa had its own vineyard. The Roman philosopher Seneca stated that, 'Drunkenness is nothing but voluntary madness'. Alcohol was distributed free, or at cost, for festivals and victory celebrations and frequently led to large-scale disorder and riots.

Modern European drinking habits still reflect the pattern established nearly 2,000 years ago by the Greeks and Romans. Wine drinking in moderation, usually with meals, still predominates in the south of Europe. In the north of Europe, where vines could not easily be

cultivated, beer drinking, without accompanying food, is more common. The beer drinking countries – Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Britain and Ireland – would, however, be regarded as semi-barbarian territory by the Romans. Thanks to the Romans, wine is still regarded as the most civilised and cultured of drinks. Wine not beer is still the drink served to impress at banquets, political summits and dinner parties because of its enduring association with class, status and wealth (Standage, 2005).

THROUGH THE AGES

By the end of the Middle Ages, most European nations had developed their own distinctive brewing and distilling styles. In Europe, religious orders have had a large part to play in the history of alcohol. It was monks who first perfected brewing and the large-scale production of beers and wines, which they would sell to the public. Religious orders of the time successfully managed the paradox of simultaneously regarding alcohol as a gift from God whilst at the same time condemning drunkenness as a sin.

The issue of excessive alcohol consumption in the UK has been an issue in debates about public health and social morals for over 300 years. The large-scale distillation of alcohol from grain into spirits, often flavoured with juniper, became immensely popular during this time. In 1690, the English Parliament even passed a law to encourage 'the Distillation of Brandy and Spirits from Corn'. This led to a massive surge in gin production and consumption, which was quickly blamed for widespread health problems and social unrest. Hogarth's print, *Gin Lane*, published in 1751, painted a graphic picture of the social disorder that followed the availability of cheap gin. Concern over the effects of gin on society led to the Gin Acts, of 1736 and 1751 respectively, which taxed and regulated the production and sale of gin. Distilled spirits, particularly rum, were also the currency that fuelled and closed the malevolent triangle of the slave trade, linking spirits, slaves and sugar.

The problems escalated as British cities grew rapidly during the industrial revolution. In the early 18th century, the mortality rate from gin was thought to be so high that it stabilised London's rapidly growing population. Temperance movements mushroomed around the 1860s in response to public concern, fuelled by the teachings of evangelistic religion and social reformers like Joseph Rowntree.

Distilled drinks, alongside firearms and infectious disease, helped to shape the modern world, as the inhabitants of the Old World sought to establish themselves as rulers of the New. Alcohol played a role in the enslavement and displacement of millions of people from indigenous cultures who were supplied by copious quantities of alcohol in exchange

for goods or land. Today, this association with slavery and exploitation has gone but the damage persists. The highest prevalence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorders in the world are found in the indigenous populations of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA. Alcohol has always provided an escape from poverty and hardship, an association that endures.

History also suggests that banning the sale of alcohol does not decrease consumption but simply encourages the growth of a black market in illicit and more dangerous formulas. In the USA in the 19th century, spirits were produced and consumed in almost unbelievable quantities. By the 1820s, a surplus of corn had led to a massive growth in the production of whisky. It is thought that during this time, the equivalent of a pint of whisky for every man, woman and child was being drunk every day across America. This led to the beginning of the Prohibition movement, which sought to ban all forms of alcohol across the USA. Prohibition reached its climax with the National Prohibition Act in 1919, which led to the banning of the sale and manufacture of alcohol across the USA between 1920 and 1933. Owing to the massively lucrative trade in black market alcohol that followed, Prohibition is widely regarded as having done more to boost organised crime than any other Act in the history of the USA.

MORE RECENTLY...

In the UK, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen widespread increases in public drunkenness. UK society has a particularly close relationship with alcohol; it is central to most of our rituals, such as weddings, christenings, funerals, leaving parties, stag nights and hen nights, and even our everyday life. The ubiquitous teapot on the dining tables of post-war Britain has been steadily replaced by the wine bottle. For most people, drinking alcohol is associated with socialising and pleasurable experiences. Responsible drinking is all about understanding the harm alcohol can have on your health, both mentally and physically, if not consumed with care and moderation. Despite numerous public health campaigns, a substantial number of drinkers regularly consume more than the recommended weekly guidelines, because they lack sufficient understanding of the harm alcohol can have and frequently cannot make sense of the confusing unit system by which alcohol strength is measured.

In modern-day UK, there is still a conflict of views as to whether alcohol is an attractive elixir or a dangerous poison. It has been accepted for two hundred years that alcohol can have a negative impact on family life, leading to domestic violence and the neglect of children. During two World Wars, successive Governments were concerned about the

deleterious impact of alcohol on industrial production because of the country's need for a punctual, sober, reliable workforce. More recently, the debate has focused on the cost to individuals and society of premature illness and death and the impact on NHS, police and community resources.

There is, however, one important group in society for whom alcohol will always be a poison and that is the unborn child. The unborn child has not been a part of 2,000 years of debate. The damage that prenatal alcohol causes to the developing foetal brain will be the focus of this guide.

KEY LEARNING POINT

- Whatever the benefits and disadvantages of alcohol to society, for the unborn child it is always a dangerous poison that must be avoided.