

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS — UNSUITABLE ATTACHMENT?

The social acceptability of alcohol means that, unlike other drugs, sanctions are not automatically applied. Neither is stigma attached to users except in cases where excess is evident. It is the consequences of drinking rather than the act itself which results in censure or social control.

The differences inherent in alcohol and illicit drug use were clearly demonstrated following the raising in 1918 of restrictions imposed by the 1915 Defence of the Realm Act. This Act not only prohibited the use of cocaine and other drugs but, at the same time, limited the availability of alcohol by introducing restricted opening hours as low as five and a half hours in some parts of the country.

After the war, two things happened. First, the restrictions on drugs were increased and the 'drug fiend' was born. There followed the Dangerous Drugs Act, administered by the Home Office, and the association between recreational drug use and criminality became institutionalised.

Meanwhile, there began a movement in exactly the opposite direction as far as alcohol was concerned. Restrictions imposed by the 1915 Act were at first ignored and then lifted. The Licensing Act of 1921 set the seal upon a movement toward liberalisation which continues to this day.

The 1961 Act matched with the 1964 elimination of retail price maintenance provided a drink entrepreneurs' charter. Outlets of all kinds could, and did, multiply. Between 1973 and 1983 the number of licensed premises increased from 109,782 to 137,031 (19 per cent).

The fact which emerges more clearly than any other is that since 1918 alcohol has become increasingly 'legal' and other recreational drugs have become 'illegal'.

TWO APPARENTLY independent but related developments are behind the alcohol agencies' desire for change:

— a realisation that far from being confined to a small, pathological group ('alcoholics'), alcohol related damage is experienced throughout the population to a greater or lesser degree;

Expanded funding for drugs agencies and the high level of political concern over drug problems have left alcohol agencies smarting over what they see as relative indifference to the much greater problem of alcohol abuse. Many have responded by changing their names and/or functions to incorporate drugs (and drug funding). Don Steele of Action on Alcohol Abuse looks at the options open to the alcohol agencies.

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— the rapid advance of illicit drug use and the unfettered legitimacy of a well-resourced (by comparison) government response.

Presented with these facts, alcohol agencies have two choices. First, it would be possible to recognise and build upon the realisation that their job in relation to alcohol is much bigger than they thought.

By concentrating upon the 'addicted minority' alcohol agencies could plug into — or take over — agencies serving illicit drug users

Their mission would be to the whole population and would include a broad spectrum ranging from advice on sensible drinking and associated behaviour to the advocacy of appropriate social and fiscal controls.

It is unlikely that any kind of populist, media-backed support would be generated by such a decision. On the contrary, unequivocal positions would have to be taken in relation to both government and the drinks trade.

ALTERNATIVELY, the alcohol agencies could re-invest their assets. Simply by concentrating upon the traditional 'addicted minority' they could, with justification, plug into — or take over — those agencies serving illicit drug users, if for no reason other than that both pathological minorities are frequently cross-addicted. This move would be attractive for a number of reasons.

► By becoming the 'same' as illicit drug agencies, additional financial resources would become available.

► Possibility of conflict with either government or the drinks industry would diminish because both are concerned with maintaining the myth of the 'pathological drinker' — the 'deviant minority' set apart from the 'normal' population.

► Areas of responsibility could be enlarged and salaries increased for what, on the surface, appeared perfectly legitimate and logical reasons. Such a fusion of activities might even increase respectabil-

ity, gain peer acclaim and receive the accolade 'progressive'.

One thing is clear: a choice has to be made concerning which of these two expansionist paths is to be followed. It is impossible to move in both directions at the same time.

The truth is that the separation, institutionalised from 1918 onward, has set a great perceptual gulf between substances labelled 'legal' and 'illegal'. As Andrew Tyler has remarked: 'The reputation that a drug achieves rarely has much to do with its pharmacological reality but is a product of a culture's topical, often racially-linked, panics: or else the reputation is manufactured to serve an imperial or corporate interest'.

In other words, permission and prohibition have a political purpose and the only link between illicit drugs and alcohol is at the point where the behaviour associated with the unrepresentative, addictive use of alcohol meets with the perception of illicit drugs as 'totally addictive'. It is the joining of a fragment with a whole; a marriage of dubious convenience.

Diversions from the dangers of alcohol toward illicit drug use is producing a distortion for which society will have to pay a high price

In considering the way forward, agencies would do well to weigh up both possible alternatives. The risks but undoubted potential social benefits attached to the first option might be taken into account. At the same time agencies should note the temporary nature of any advantage which might accrue from taking the second course.

Overall, one fact emerges quite clearly: the diversion of attention from the pervasive dangers of rising alcohol consumption in the general population toward an exaggerated perception of the dangers of marginal illicit drug use is producing a distortion for which society will have to pay a high price by the end of the century.

1. *New Statesman*, vol. 3, no. 2867, 7 March 1986, page 21.

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Don Steele is the Director of Action on Alcohol Abuse (AAA). He believes there is so much unfinished business in relation to the abuse of alcohol that alcohol agencies should concentrate on that problem and not allow themselves to be diverted by the temporary attractions of addiction funds.

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