Alcohol and harm reduction in Russia

The Series on alcohol and global health, published in *The Lancet* today, draws attention to one of the most pressing public health problems in the world. Alcohol promotes inequities and accounts for substantial harm to individuals, families, and communities, most of which could be prevented or reduced. The three Series papers address the burden of alcohol, strategies for harm reduction, and future actions. By way of an example, an Article analyses the influence of alcohol on cause-specific mortality in Russia.

Alcohol is toxic to several organs and is implicated in many diseases. In the Series, Jürgen Rehm and colleagues use data from WHO to ascribe 6·3% of deaths in men and 1·1% of deaths in women to alcohol. The influence of alcohol on mortality was greater in younger people and in areas of high consumption. For example, in Europe, where per-capita consumption is 12 L pure alcohol per person per year (about double the global consumption), more than one in every ten male deaths is attributed to alcohol. Additionally, alcohol is blamed for the loss of 4·6% of disability-adjusted life years and, in middle-income and high-income countries, for the loss of 1% of gross domestic product.

Also in the Series, Peter Anderson and co-authors review the clinical efficacy and cost-effectiveness of various interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm. The result is a six-item toolkit of transferable evidence-based policies. High taxation, drink-driving legislation, banning advertising, limiting availability (coupled with action against illegal production), and providing help for hazardous drinking are each beneficial in reducing harm. Education in isolation, such as industry-favoured school-based programmes, is ineffective window dressing. Of encouragement for doctors is the effectiveness of brief advice.

In response to the scale of alcohol-related harm and the availability of proven strategies to reduce that harm, the third Series paper calls for action. Sally Casswell and Thaksaphon Thamarangsi lament that the harm related to alcohol has been relatively neglected by WHO compared with the harm from illicit drugs and tobacco. One proposed solution is a legally-binding Framework Convention on Alcohol Control. The authors argue that non-governmental organisations could work in concert with WHO to

implement the framework by both supporting and holding governments to account.

Lest familiarity with alcohol engenders complacency, consider the example of Russia—where in some industrial cities, adult workers may drink one bottle of vodka per day. David Zaridze and co-authors show that if associations with alcohol consumption are causal, then over half of deaths in men aged 15–54 years during 1990–2001 in the three Russian cities studied were due to alcohol. The study of almost 50 000 adults gives effect sizes similar to those found by other authors in different Russian settings, and helps to explain the shortened life expectancy of 59 years for Russian men compared with 76 years for men in the UK.

Taxation on alcohol, formalised by Ivan "the terrible" around 1550, is a substantial source of income for the Russian treasury. As a result, periodic efforts to control alcohol have exacerbated economic hardship and been short-lived. The last major reform was by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, influenced by his daughter, Irina, a physician. By reducing production and limiting sales, the programme is estimated to have saved 1 million lives and increased life expectancy by 2 years. These improvements were reversed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when production and consumption of alcohol, accidents, and deaths all rose.

In 2005, then President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that 40 000 Russians died each year from alcohol poisoning (often from drinking non-beverage alcohol, such as cologne) and introduced legislation to curb the sale of surrogate alcohol. But far bolder measures are needed to reduce the estimated 600 000 deaths a year in Russia caused by alcohol. In addition to implementing the proven policies outlined in today's Series, Russia must stop or tax the illicit production of spirits, believed to account for at least 50% of consumption in the country. This in turn means confrontation with organised criminals and corrupt officials. But the time has never been better for Russia to shake off the chains of alcohol. The country has strong and ambitious leaders, the recently launched National Priority Project for health can provide a framework, and income from vast energy reserves can offset costs. All that is needed is the political will to make public health a priority.

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For more on the Framework Convention on Alcohol Control see Editorial Lancet 2009; 373: 433

For more on non-beverage alcohol see Articles Lancet 2007; 369: 2001