

On the Harms of Alcohol Consumption and Prevention

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As almost everybody knows, alcohol consumption, as one of three primary public health problems of the world, is the third basic reason for preventable deaths and injuries on global basis. Over three hundred thousand people between the ages 15-29 lose their lives for alcohol related reasons every year in the world. Apart from being an addictive substance, alcohol is a public health problem known as the reason for 60 different diseases and conditions, injuries, mental and behavioral disorders including digestive system diseases, cancers, cardiovascular diseases, immunity disorders, lung diseases, musculoskeletal diseases, gonadal dysfunctions, and increasing risk of premature and low weight births. In addition, alcohol is associated with many serious social and developmental issues, including violence, child neglect and abuse, and absenteeism in the workplace.

It is scientifically known that there is no safe level of alcohol use especially for young people. Many negative outcomes of alcohol consumption could be prevented by adopting meaningful alcohol policies. Practices in the world have shown that it is possible to decrease the harms of alcohol by evidence-based and cost-effective interventions. Though the positive reflections of these interventions to the economy, society and general health of the population have been observed on the basis of countries, there is still a need for global cooperation and solidarity to decrease the harm and solve problems. It will be a great gain for public health to start the work required for an “international alcohol control framework convention” to prevent the harms of alcohol.

It is a well-known fact that the alcohol industry targets young people and influences their drinking patterns. Exposure to alcohol marketing, advertising and sponsorships in young ages increases the early initiation of alcohol in their lives.

However, the WHO European Charter on Alcohol states that “All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcoholic beverages”.

To avoid this industrial influence on youth, increasing the role of youth involvement in alcohol policy and raising awareness amongst youth against the influence of industrial advertisement are crucial.

In the efforts of reducing the harms of alcohol, we face new challenges such as technological innovation and virtual advertising that cross international borders. Since modern alcohol advertising knows no frontiers; strict controls on marketing, advertising and sponsorship of the alcohol industry are crucial to prevent the youth from negative consequences of alcohol use.

With regards to this, I would like to mention the alcohol policy law which was adopted in Turkey, in 2013, as an exemplary model.

Alcohol policy in Turkey was mostly based on the 4250 numbered law which was enacted in 1942 in the monopoly period for alcoholic beverages. This law adopts some rules on alcohol marketing regulation but mostly, away from contemporary public health principles.

At last, the Turkish Government has prepared a new draft law, numbered 6487 on alcohol policy within the framework of “The National Alcohol Control Action Plan”. The bill was proposed and prepared by the Ministry of Health and was approved in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 24th of May, 2013 and the law was started to be implemented throughout the country.

According to this law, campaigns, promotions or events that aim to encourage the use or sale of alcohol are limited especially for young people.

This regulation firstly limits the advertisement of alcoholic beverages in printed and visual media:

All kinds of advertising and promotion of alcoholic beverages are prohibited,

Campaigns, promotions or events that aim to encourage the use or sale of these products will not be allowed,

Companies that produce, import or market alcoholic beverages will not be permitted to be sponsor for events by using the brand or logo of their products,

It makes obligatory to be placed warning labels and statements on the bottles of alcohol drinks.

Secondly, the regulation limits the availability of alcohol drinks:

The sale of alcoholic beverages will be banned between the 10 pm and 6 am.

Alcoholic beverages will not be sold to individuals under the age of 18.

Alcoholic beverages cannot be sold in motorway service areas, gas stations, gyms, and public institutions.

Individuals under the age of 18 will not be allowed to be employed in the production, sale and marketing of alcoholic beverages,

The shops selling alcoholic beverages will need to be at least 100 meters away from schools, universities, student dormitories and places of worship.

Thirdly, it adopts heavy penalties for drink driving, and severe sanctions for the violations of these principles.

When we evaluate the alcohol law from a public health point of view, we see that the restrictions are in line with the guidelines of WHO and the other public health organizations. WHO and the public health community recommend reducing physical availability of alcohol, restricting or banning alcohol advertising and promotion, and raising the price of alcohol. These are all the most effective ways suggested by WHO to reduce the burden of harmful use of alcohol.

Unfortunately, this comprehensive alcohol law became a political instrument between the ruling and the opposition political parties in Turkey. The new law faced very strong objections from the secular segments of the society which believe that it deliberately restricts their freedom and it is an intervention into their lifestyle. Industrial involvement and lobbying increased the reaction against regulations. Industry propagates that the alcohol regulations are religion based and mostly violate people's freedom. However when the regulations are examined closely, the principles that were adopted with the law are the basic guidelines of WHO.

I strongly believe that, as physicians, health workers and civil society members, we should work to develop contemporary strategies for dealing with alcohol consumption and for the prevention of addiction by using evidence-based scientific methods. Our efforts should focus especially on carrying out preventive social and advocacy activities aiming to create public opinion and raise awareness of the decision-makers and the general public all over the world. This is a great social responsibility and global task for leaving an addiction-free world to our young generations.