

Alcohol without the Hangover

Professor David Nutt

**SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar
Wednesday, 19th February 2014, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh**

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are proud to present the 'Occasional Extras', which alongside our 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars, are events where we invite established experts to discuss and debate their research, motivations, aspirations and plans. We were delighted to have Prof. David Nutt as the first speaker. The event was filmed and the recording is available through SHAAP's website, www.shaap.org.uk.

Briefing papers, including this one, aim to capture the main themes and to communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is fully responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

A psychiatrist and neuropsychopharmacologist, Professor David Nutt has undertaken a wide range of research in the UK and abroad on the effects of alcohol and other drugs on the brain. He is also known for the controversy surrounding his dismissal from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) where he was first a Council member and then Chair of the Technical Committee. He was dismissed because he had said publicly that drug regulations were unjust, because they did not reflect scientific evidence and unhelpfully incriminated people.

Speaking to an audience of around 140 people, which included doctors and nurses, academics, policy

makers, addiction workers and students, Prof. Nutt's talk began with a discussion on how the media represents stories relating to young people dying from causes related to alcohol and other drugs. This is within a UK context, where he pointed out that around three young people per week die of alcohol poisoning.

He quoted the case of Amy Winehouse, whose death had been widely assumed to be caused by illegal drugs, when in fact it was specifically due to alcohol poisoning. In another case, the press had reported the case of a young man who had died of alcohol poisoning, following a drinking game. His family did not want him to be remembered as a 'druggie', in spite of the fact that alcohol is a drug.

Prof. Nutt also referred to the concerted campaign, which had included billboards, publicising the case of Leah Betts who had died in 1997 after taking Ecstasy. Her death had actually been caused because of excessive water consumption, which may have been related to the public advice being given out at the time to Ecstasy consumers. Prof. Nutt also described the case of the death of two young people which the police reported was due to Mephedrone intake. In fact, the scientific evidence at the time had not indicated that Mephedrone could kill. In this case, the young men had been drinking alcohol for at least seven hours and had also taken a different drug named Methadone, which is particularly toxic in combination with alcohol.

The cases above, Prof. Nutt argued, are only a few of the many misunderstandings about alcohol and other recreational drugs being disseminated by the police and the press. He also suggested that the alcohol industry has an interest in misleading the public into thinking that alcohol is not as dangerous as the illegal drugs – or indeed that alcohol is not a drug, when in fact alcohol is the most harmful drug of contemporary use.

Prof. Nutt argued that the UK Government has been banning drugs because of media hysteria, instead of scientific evidence. Since any new recreational drug being released is automatically banned, he argued that if alcohol were invented nowadays, and we applied the same rules that we apply to other recreational drugs, then alcohol would be banned, because it is highly toxic.

Prof. Nutt also discussed the way in which some politicians talk about their (past) recreational drug use. For example, when politicians are asked what drugs they have used, they might say that they used cannabis when they were young – and that they did not enjoy it. However, they are very likely to forget to mention that they often drink half a bottle of wine at night.

Another example of the ambiguous relationship which politicians have with alcohol is the number of bars in Parliament, which could indicate that they are dealing with legislation while intoxicated, which would be

unacceptable in any other profession. This also means, he argued, that politicians have a complete disregard for the effect of alcohol on themselves.

Alcohol is the drug which causes most harm not only to the user, but also to society. This, he argued, is a view shared widely by many researchers, who consider that alcohol may be the number-one public health problem in the UK and the world. Prof. Nutt also referred to data comparing cirrhosis cases in France and in the UK, and how there was a time when the French died four times more of cirrhosis than the British. Nowadays, however, the British have the highest rate of cirrhosis in Europe - and Scotland is of special concern. Prof. Nutt linked this outcome with failed UK alcohol policy which has facilitated the increase in alcohol consumption, which doubled in the last 60 years.

There has been a massive promotion of alcohol, which is widely available and far cheaper than in previous decades. Over the last 30 years, we have also been changing our drinking habits, by consuming much more alcohol at home – and passing out in front of the TV, rather than going to bars.

Talking about what can be done to start resolving this health problem, Prof. Nutt argued that we could start by telling children the truth about alcohol through education. He also explained that the introduction of the Minimum Unit Price (MUP) policy would impact positively on the most problematic drinkers. Even where there is a possibility that people might not drink much less, even small changes in consumption can generate big improvements in health and avoid death.

Prof. Nutt also indicated that less than 20% of people suffering from alcoholism get treated, even though there are efficient treatments for alcoholism around, which are not been used widely, in comparison with treatments for other disorders, such as depression. There are also drugs which can be used successfully to control the amount of alcohol that people consume.

Alcohol is fashionable. Prof. Nutt gave the example of the character James Bond, who is always drinking a lot. However, just as alcohol has been made fashionable by the industry, it could be made unfashionable. Alcohol consumption could be framed as a health problem which we need to address, similar to other issues, such as our blood pressure, weight or cholesterol.

Prof. Nutt also suggested that, similarly to the way in which e-cigarettes seem to be less harmful than ordinary cigarettes, a much safer alternative to alcohol, could be invented – and that, he suggested, would be well within the compass of modern neuroscience. However, neither the industry nor the government are supporting the scientific exploration of such a venture.

The audience discussion included praise for Prof. Nutt's book (details below). The book discusses in a very straightforward and informative way how the relationship between cannabis - and other illegal drugs – with Schizophrenia is unsubstantiated, while alcohol can cause brain damage. People also discussed how alcohol consumption causes damages both to the person who is consuming it and to society more than illegal drugs.

In response to a question regarding changing elements on alcohol to make it less harmful, Prof. Nutt argued that the alcohol industry would not accept such initiatives. Regarding the topic of measuring alcohol consumption through units, it was pointed out that countries are adopting different methods and that indicating alcohol content in bottles can have unintended and contradictory outcomes. Rather than checking labels so as to reduce one's alcohol content, some people might do so in order to select products with high alcohol content.

Regarding the effectiveness of regulation, Prof. Nutt argued that in countries such as France, cirrhosis is going down, because they have stopped advertising alcohol, halved the drink-drive limit and introduced a minimum price on wine, which has led to people benefiting from drinking

better quality wine and the industry to operate in a highly profitable market.

Comments from the audience suggested that it seems to be wrong to tell young people that other drugs are safer than alcohol. It was suggested that the correct message should be for young people not to use drugs at all. It was also pointed out that young people use alcohol because it is what is available - and alcohol happens to be the most dangerous drug. Prof. Nutt pointed out that, whatever the drug, the later you start using it, the less harmful it will be. He also said that the safest thing is not to use drugs at all, but at the very least young people should know what they are doing.

Another topic which Prof Nutt discussed with the audience was the possible changes in the availability of alcohol. He argued that we could stop selling alcohol in supermarkets and consider an increase in the legal age to buy it. In the USA, increasing the legal age from 18 to 21 had a positive impact on the number of road deaths. Research has also indicated that alcoholism in under-age people seem to become established three years before the legal age. Therefore, while in the USA young people start becoming alcoholic at 18, in the UK they do so at 15.

During discussions on how other countries deal with the alcohol consumption issue, Prof. Nutt indicated that in Sweden, people have to plan ahead in order to consume alcohol, because going to a bar is expensive and state shops have limited hours. The Swedes, he explained, drink half of what we drink and have a third of our health harms.

During a discussion of how politicians and the press deal with issues involving alcohol and other recreational drugs, Prof. Nutt argued that they seem to reflect misinformed public opinion. The discussion moved onto the issue of Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) of alcohol, a policy which the Scottish government has legislated for but which has not yet been implemented due to legal challenges by the Scotch Whisky Association and other alcohol industry actors.

Prof. Nutt said that we would probably have a different debate on MUP if newspapers explained the issues correctly. He suggested that journalists seem to be against MUP, maybe because they do not know the facts, or perhaps because the industry has bought some of the media. He pointed out that MUP policy targets the people who are most harmed by alcohol use, including people who are dependent.

Prof. Nutt concluded by emphasising that alcohol is the biggest health problem which we are facing up today and that we need to do more to face up to this.

Prof. Nutt explained that all the proceeds from the sale of his book, (details below) are donated to the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs (ISCD), a charity which

does not receive donations from the Government or from the alcohol industry.

David J. Nutt (2012) *Drugs without the hot air: minimising the harms of legal and illegal drugs*



Royal College of
Physicians of Edinburgh

SHAAP/SARN Alcohol Occasionals

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are delighted to announce the start of a series of lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars to showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use.

All the seminars will be run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and will take place from 12.30–14.00 at their historic premises at 9 Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 1JQ. Lunch will be provided.

These events will provide the chance for researchers, practitioners and policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice.

Important: Places for all events are strictly limited and we need you to confirm if you would like to attend these events. You can do this by emailing the SHAAP Policy Officer shaap@rcpe.ac.uk to confirm. If you have not booked you will not have a place.

If you are interested in presenting your own research, please get in touch with us at shaap@rcpe.ac.uk.