

ALCOHOL AND SOCIETY TODAY

There has been a lot of discussion in the last few years about the continuing problem of alcohol and the effect it has on society. Should we treat alcohol as if it were an illicit drug?

Some of the promoters of harsh restrictions on the sale and marketing of certain alcoholic beverages (restrictions such as advertising bans and higher taxes) have justified their proposals with the erroneous assertion that alcohol is no different than illegal drugs. There have even been stories in some of the media attempting to equate alcohol with the use and/or abuse of illegal substances such as marijuana, crack, cocaine and heroin.

We will first mention as a matter of information that alcoholic beverages have been a part of western civilization for more than 25 centuries. Now we know there will always be people among us who drink. America has already tried prohibition and learned conclusively that it does not work. The simple fact is that many Americans like to drink and the vast majority of those who do, drink responsibly, thus, the public policy challenge we face today is not to stigmatize all drinking as bad but to maximize the probability that those who choose to drink will do so in a responsible manner.

It's a fact that excessive drinking can seriously damage one's health. Those who claim that "alcohol is a drug" want that word to carry a particular, threatening connotation. In reality, however, "drug" is an ethically, legally and physiologically neutral term that encompasses a wide spectrum of substances.

According to a well-known medical textbook of pharmacology, a drug is any chemical agency that affects living processes. A drug can be as menacing as cocaine, as benign as sucrose or as helpful as vitamin C. In a societal sense, some drugs relieve pain and assist in the healing process. Others are safely and legally enjoyed by millions of people very day, even though overuse can result in undesirable side effects. And some drugs are so terribly addictive that simply experimenting with them carries substantial risk.

Recent studies show that excess alcohol consumption can lead to a number of serious health problems, and of course there is the problem of addiction which must be taken into consideration. Who among us hasn't been exposed to a friend or relative with a severe drinking problem. Many of societies' problems today such as spouse abuse, child abuse and dysfunctional family relationships can be traced to drinking problems.

Alcohol may lead to liver problems, a variety of cancers as well as forms of osteoporosis and depression, and studies are showing, too, that women are more susceptible to the ill effects of alcohol than are men. From this information, it is safe to conclude that anything which has this type of effect on one's general health, is going to affect the entire system. And research has shown that alcohol depletes the body of its necessary vitamins and minerals.

"Social drinking" seems to be an accepted practice these days and the arguments both pro and con will always be with us. It is our hope that as you read and consider this information you will become more aware of the effect that alcohol has on society today.