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## CORRESPONDENCE

### **Cycles of Social Reform: Is the Current Anti-Alcohol Movement Cresting?**

Dear Editor:

The purpose of this letter is to briefly present some hypotheses for debate. I propose that there are signs that suggest a cresting of the current anti-alcohol movement, and that prohibition of alcohol for those under 21 years of age has done little to decrease negative alcohol-related behaviors in this age group. In America we often ignore the past. This leads to the repetition of similar social policies that were not effective in previous generations. The current anti-alcohol movement cannot really be discussed without some historical reference putting it into perspective. In general, anti-alcohol movements are likely to be caused by many factors, for example, the clash of values between New World immigrants from different areas of Europe, stress from rapid urbanization and grass roots concerns about specific drinking-related problems. In addition collective amnesia of past social events, because of the death of the oldest generation, may lead to the 70-year cycle of health and social reforms concerning a variety of issues.

In Europe two different drinking cultures developed in antiquity. In the Mediterranean regions, wine consumption with meals by all members of the culture evolved, along with a norm of moderation. In the more northern and eastern regions of Europe, drinking to intoxication of grain-based beverages at feasts emerged, along with ambivalence towards alcohol. The Roman invasions brought the wine culture to central Europe. In the upheaval of the Early Middle Ages the Nordic patterns of the Germanic invaders became assimilated into the Mediterranean norm, creating a "blended pattern" in central Western Europe and England. Areas untouched by the Romans retained the Northern feast drinking patterns. During the Protestant Reformation those areas of northern Europe that became Protestant also tended to be the areas with ambivalence towards alcohol. Immigrants from the different European regions, the descendants of whom still make up the bulk of American society, brought their drinking patterns to the New World, thus setting the stage for cultural clashes. In part, the first two anti-alcohol movements may have been fueled by cultural clashes between the Protestant Establishment and impoverished immigrants with different religious backgrounds and drinking patterns.

In the United States there have been three clean-living or social reform movements during the past 200 years. These movements occur about every 70 years. During the approximately 35-year reform phase of the cycle, opposition toward alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sexual-related behaviors and certain foods and advocacy for exercise, pure water, vegetarian diets and the prevention and elimination of other health, social and environmental problems have been common.

In the anti-alcohol aspect of each of the three movements, a social problem that is related to negative behaviors associated with heavy drinking is identified. These social problems were: poverty and disease among liquor-drinking Irish immigrants in the first movement (1830s–1850s); "saloons," which were gathering places for immigrants beginning to flex political power, in the second (1880s–1910s); and "drunk driving," seen as the main reason for highway fatalities among youth who typically drink to intoxication as per the Nordic feast drinking pattern, in the current movement. Public efforts to eliminate the problem then ensue. When the problem is not immediately eradicated, alcohol is then seen as *the* problem, and the substance becomes "demonized." Temperance (moderation) sentiments are then replaced by abstinence and public policy prohibition measures. A large part of the population ignores these measures, however, and continues to consume alcohol illegally. This in turn causes other social problems and forces public policy to compensate.

The current movement started during the late 1970s. About that time some states raised the legal drinking age because of the fear that increases in fatal motor vehicle accidents resulted from the lowering of the drinking age laws during the Vietnam War years. As in the two prior movements, "grass roots" efforts began. Organizations, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Students Against Drunk Driving and the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and various governmental agencies formed or advocated measures to combat drunk driving and negative behaviors related to alcohol consumption. Public policy efforts ensued, such as severe penalties against drunk driving, lowering of legal BAC to designate impaired driving, mandatory signs in California drinking establishments concerning fetal alcohol syndrome, 21 year old alcohol purchase laws, government-sponsored abstinence education in schools and colleges and warning labels on alcoholic beverages. Advocacy for increased taxes and the elimination of media advertisement is still on the agenda of anti-alcohol forces.

Not since the early part of this century had there been so much anti-alcohol rhetoric as that in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As was found in the earlier anti-alcohol movements, alcohol again became demonized. Alcohol consumption, the alcohol beverage industry and even individuals who advocated moderate drinking were seen as not respectable. Some health-related organizations even eliminated the "cocktail hour" at annual conferences.

However, as in the past, these alcohol countermeasures had only temporary effects on the social problems they were attempting to eliminate. Although fatal motor vehicle crashes and consumption among youth decreased for about a decade, they are now on the rise. Among university students, an increase in problems related to heavy drinking began to occur soon after the federal 21 years of age

purchase laws were passed in 1987. In addition there have been increases in alcohol consumption among high school youth during the past year or so.

There are signs that the current anti-alcohol movement may be on the wane. The first sign of a backlash toward the current movement may have been the *60 Minutes* television program in 1991 called the "French Paradox." It discussed the fact that, even though the French have a very high fat diet, they have a lower prevalence of heart disease due to their wine consumption. Since 1993 there has been an acceleration of research and reports related to the correlation of moderate drinking and longevity and to the health benefits of moderate alcohol consumption. Congress questioned the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention (a tax-supported federal agency) on its abstinence-only orientation for educational programs. A change in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 1996* (Department of Agriculture, 1996) stated that moderate alcohol consumption, as opposed to abstinence in the 1990 edition (Department of Agriculture, 1990), might be conducive to good health. In March 1996 the state of Louisiana proposed lowering its legal drinking age to 18 years. Recently an administrator at a Colorado university proposed lowering the drinking age for students in certain circumstances. Over the next few years various other signs of the waning of the current anti-alcohol movement will likely occur.

Because of the cresting in the anti-alcohol wave, now is the time to reevaluate the restrictive policies and educational programs implemented during the past 15 years. There should be changes in education programs and public policy measures that allow for different values concerning alcohol and its consumption. These changes should include more balanced approaches to alcohol and its consumption in school and community programming rather than just abstinence education.

Alcohol education needs to be part of the comprehensive school health program and should include the following information: the history and manufacturing of alcohol; variations in cultural values, norms and attitudes concerning drinking; the social, physiological and psychological health benefits and consequences of alcohol consumption; responsible choices concerning drinking in our society; and techniques for safe and moderate drinking for those who might choose to drink at some point in their life.

At the community level various organizations such as service, legal, religious and governmental groups, along with the alcohol beverage industry, need to be involved with alcohol information and education. Alcohol needs to be recognized as a substance that can have both positive and negative effects just like other substances or activities.

In terms of public policy there needs to be a lowering of the legal purchase age to 19, the age at which many young adults are involved with postsecondary education away from home. Parents need to be allowed to serve alcohol to their children in public places such as restaurants. As a society we need to begin working toward developing a consensus as to what constitutes positive and negative alcohol use. There should be legal sanctions against negative behaviors resulting from alcohol abuse such as driving while intoxicated and violence. In summary, now, at the crest of this current movement, is the time to take some positive action for more reasonable policies concerning alcohol use in our country.

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