



## A basis for British alcohol policy – or an unoriginal mish-mash?

### Tackling alcohol together. The evidence base for a UK alcohol policy

Edited by Duncan Raistrick, Ray Hodgson, Bruce Ritson. London: Free Association Books, 1999. 350pp. £15.95 pbk.

**Y**ou know how it is. You're in the audience at an international conference on alcohol problems listening to the opening session. The first speaker is a Scandinavian who probably is saying something important but is rather difficult to follow, particularly as he uses no visual aids. The second is a globetrotting superstar who gives a flash *Powerpoint* show with loads of graphs and much too much data to assimilate at a single sitting. And the third, presenting the British perspective, uses old fashioned, rather shabby overheads. He starts by repeating data already delivered by the other speakers, trying for a domestic spin by talking about a little local study, allegedly the result of attempting to stand on those previously presenting giants' shoulders. If those three presentations were books, they would be Kjetil Bruun's *Alcohol Control Policies in Public Health Perspective*,<sup>1</sup> Griffith Edwards's *Alcohol Policy and the Public Good*<sup>2</sup> – and *Tackling Alcohol Together*.

It's not that this new one, *Tackling Alcohol Together*, is not a worthwhile book. It is well written, comprehensively documented and flows remarkably smoothly for a multi-author book. The problem is that it is totally lacking in creativity or originality. Indeed, its format and arguments so closely follow *Alcohol Policy and the Public Good* that one can feel the vital fluids of that book seeping through its veins.

It consists of 13 chapters and three appendices. The chapters are in four sections, all very predictable: "Setting the Scene" – history and stuff about policy being everybody's business; "Patterns of Drinking and Associated Risks" – drinking in different populations, intoxication in social and environmental contexts, individual and population level risks; "Influences on Drinking and Related Problems" – price, regulation, media, generalist and specialist treatment and training; and "A Systems Approach to Policy", derived from the work of Harold Holder in the USA. The first appendix is interesting, listing key documents in the development of alcohol policy in Britain between 1959 and 1998 (though it is headed "1950 to 1998"). The second reports the findings from a clearly flawed point prevalence postal questionnaire survey of alcohol clients attending British treatment agencies on 4 December 1996.

Despite its claims to be "The evidence base for a UK alcohol policy", the book is a mish-mash of evidence from all over the place, interspersed with pleas and polemic. It bleats away about how much we spend on alcohol, and about how many of us still drink over the so-called safe limits; about how people use alcohol to get drunk (what else is it for?); about how much misery and mayhem our drinking causes. And it makes a big point about ambivalence – that we love drinking despite the problems it causes. Yes, in the same way as we heat our homes and cause global warming; drive our cars and kill people on the roads; buy cheaper food from supermarkets and fund battery farming. Now, what is the point the authors are trying to make?

And yet ... there are important issues and agendas here. Our drinking does cause harms, and some of these could be and should be minimised. But let us not forget that one of society's principal tricks to deal with the aforesaid ambivalence was to create a deviant minority of drinkers upon whom we could lumber our stigma. Only when we stop doing that will we be able to tackle alcohol problems seriously. We have to start by deconstructing alcohol dependence or alcoholism or dipsomania or problem drinking or whatever you care to call 'it'. Then, but not until then, can we start *Tackling Alcohol Together*. You know how it is.

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1 Bruun K., et al. *Alcohol control policies in public health perspective*. Helsinki: Forssa, 1975.

2 Edwards G., et al. *Alcohol policy and the public good*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

### The editors of *Tackling Alcohol Together* reply

**D**ouglas Cameron seems to have missed the main objective of this book. The forthcoming National Alcohol Policy is expected to be the most important UK alcohol policy statement since the Kessel Report. *Tackling Alcohol Together*'s sole purpose is to inform both those involved in drafting the policy and any subsequent consultation or debate, complementing a more consultative project conducted by Alcohol Concern. The key elements of the national policy will be determined by policy makers and service commissioners and they are the book's primary targets. It follows that we would wish the book to be judged on how well the complexities of drink and drinking are summarised for the non-specialist rather than for academics or for the international conference circuit.

It is true that the book follows the approach of *Alcohol Policy and the Public Good*; we consider this to be a strength. In the case of *Tackling Alcohol Together*, the Society for the Study of Addiction invited a group of distinguished scientists to prepare position papers on their specialist subjects. These were debated and then edited to be pooled into an integrated text. *Tackling Alcohol Together* attempts to bring together evidence pertinent to the UK. Of course, much of this originates from outside the UK. We believe the readership will readily understand the limitations of the evidence presented.

Douglas Cameron's preoccupation seems to lie in "deconstructing alcohol dependence or alcoholism". In fact, the book finds sympathy with this view, but only so far as the evidence takes it. If he is suggesting that differences between drinkers, such as dependence or neuroadaptive change, are unreal or are social constructs, then we strongly disagree; if he is not, then surely "deconstruction" is simply a relabelling exercise. Are we to use the term 'drink seekers' instead?

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SOURCE

*Tackling Alcohol Together* is available from Alcohol Concern, phone 020 7928 7377, price £15.95 plus 10% p&p.