

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALCOHOL INTAKE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS VARIOUS ASPECTS OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN A GROUP OF ADOLESCENT SCHOOLCHILDREN

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As part of a preliminary study concerned with the development of an intervention program for high school children aimed at promoting health-oriented lifestyle changes, data was obtained from 150 14-15 year-old high school children of various ethnic and social backgrounds concerning their alcohol intake and their attitudes towards various aspects of alcohol consumption.

Alcohol consumption was measured as part of a general dietary survey one month before the attitudinal data was collected. A frequency method that had previously proven satisfactory for light to moderate drinkers (1) was used to collect consumption data. The mean alcohol consumption in boys was 4.68 g alcohol/day with 13% consuming greater than 10 g alcohol/day. For girls the mean was 1.48 g alcohol/day with only 2% consuming greater than 10 g alcohol/day. There was a higher mean consumption in boys of Italian extraction, in "lower" social classes as defined by parental occupation and in children of lower academic performance.

There was little agreement amongst the children as to what constituted "light", "moderate", "heavy" or "alcoholic" drinking but on average the heavier consumers of alcohol set the category limits higher than other children. Only 9% of the heavier-drinking children mentioned alcohol as a major cause of ill health in Australia with none mentioning it as a major contributor to deaths (including alcohol-related car accidents). In the other groups ("non" to "moderate" drinkers) the respective percentages were 52% for alcohol as a major cause of ill health and 9% with respect to death (almost exclusively car accidents).

When asked to list the advantages of alcohol consumption, there was a greater emphasis in the heavier-drinking children (40% response) in the area of alcohol's role in the relief from tension, worry or stress than in other groups (average 21% response). In addition, in terms of the disadvantages of alcohol consumption, there was more concern in the heavier drinking group with the short-term disadvantages of consumption such as "getting drunk", "being sick" and "accidents", whereas the other children emphasised the longer-term consequences such as alcoholism/addiction, organ disease, ill health and social problems.

In conclusion, in this relatively young group of alcohol consumers, there were already some marked, consumption-related, attitudinal differences towards various aspects of alcohol consumption, emphasising the need for effective health-oriented alcohol education programs in early adolescence.

(1) BAGHURST, K.I. and McMICHAEL, A.J. (1978) Comm. Hlth. Stud. II, 3, 135.