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Eliminating What Is Pleasurable AND Good for Us – Drinking and Sex

by Stanton Peele Ph.D

In 2000, Archie Brodsky and I published in a refereed journal a survey of the psychological benefits of moderate alcohol consumption. The strongest benefit of this kind was reduced dementia and better cognitive functioning among older light-to-moderate drinkers. Results of this kind were found in prospective studies (that is, comparing drinkers and abstainers at a baseline time and going forward for years) for all social groups and around the world (including both inner-city communities and medical professionals in the U.S. as well as French and other European nationals).

Our analysis received little attention at the time (except to be attacked by Robin Room in the same journal in which our report was published). However, in February of 2009, the leading alcohol journal in the United States – *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* – published the results of a symposium conducted by the prestigious Research Society on Alcoholism (RSA) which found strong evidence for both the cardioprotective and long-term cognitive benefits of moderate drinking.

The researchers themselves noted the paradox involved in reporting benefits from drinking in a journal devoted to examining the dangers of alcohol consumption:

In contrast to many years of important research and clinical attention to the pathological effects of alcohol (ethanol) abuse, the past several decades have seen the publication of a number of peer-reviewed studies indicating the beneficial effects of light-moderate, nonbinge consumption of varied alcoholic beverages.

While the announcement of such cardioprotective effects – which have been repeatedly found over the years – is hardly surprising, highlighting the cognitive benefits of light-moderate drinking is more so. Reviewing 44 studies, the RSA group found the majority revealed “significantly reduced risks of cognitive loss or dementia in moderate, non-binge consumers of alcohol (wine, beer, liquor).” In addition to living longer, long-term moderate drinkers preserve their mental acuity!

American media – indeed, American medicine and public health – are hard-pressed to deal with this

finding. The popular TV news magazine 60 Minutes featured a segment entitled, “Fountain Of Youth In a Wine Rx?” on January 25th. But, wait a second – didn’t the RSA review include all forms of beverage alcohol – wine, beer liquor – in its conclusions?

60 Minutes wasn’t announcing drinking was good for you. Instead, it reported, “Scientists have found a substance called resveratrol in red wine that slows down the aging process in mice. Will it someday lengthen the lives of humans, too?” Whoo – the show wasn’t about drinking at all, but about pharmaceuticals (the description of the segment at CBS’s Web site was sponsored by Pfizer). Americans shouldn’t drink wine, or alcohol – they should anticipate a drug version of a substance which is found in red wine that has prolonged the lives of mice.

Of course, alcohol in small regular doses has already been repeatedly found to prolong the lives of actual humans – not to mention preserving their minds. What’s more, it is already available. What’s more many people enjoy drinking alcohol and it makes them feel good. The RSA symposium actually considered the possibility that the benefits of beverage alcohol are due to resveratrol. However, that the substance is found in greater concentrations in red wine and yet cardio benefits are noted equally for all forms of alcohol argues against this.

Instead, the researchers concluded that resveratrol and alcohol may operate through similar mechanisms: “it is interesting to note to note that there are many similarities in the cardioprotective mechanisms of action and molecular targets between resveratrol and alcohol that may force the rethinking of the relative significance of alcohol versus resveratrol in health and disease.” If you find that last clause unclear and ambiguous, then you aren’t alone: I’m not sure whether it means that we should re-evaluate the relative healthfulness of alcohol or whether they’re agreeing with 60 Minutes that resveratrol can replace human alcohol consumption.

In the Woody Allen film, *Sleeper*, a health food store proprietor (Allen) awakens in the future. The people he encounters 200 years hence have robots for servants and use machines for sex. Allen, an unreformed lecher, introduces Diane Keaton to sex the old-fashioned way. It might seem that Americans are intent on performing the same anti-miracle with alcohol – replacing a pleasurable, age-old human activity with a mechanical procedure – that Allen imagined people in future centuries would do with sex.

What a world to look forward to.

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