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As UK Alcohol consumption continues decline in 2009, why aren't hospital admissions and alcohol attributable fractions falling?

By Helena Conibear

Following consistent reductions of consumption by all ages in the UK since 2004, new figures suggest that alcohol consumption is falling at the fastest rate for more than 60 years.

Provisional figures for 2009, based on sales, suggest consumption fell by 8% to 3.81 litres per head in the first half of 2009 compared with 4.15 litres per head in the same period of 2008. The last time the nation's alcohol consumption fell by more than this was during 1948 when it fell by 11% over the course of the year. If this trend continues, UK consumption will be 14% lower than in 2004 this year.

This offers encouraging news for those working in alcohol policy that a combination of well enforced underage prevention age schemes in retail, server training and community partnerships in the on trade, effective enforcement of drink drive and consumer communications regarding responsible drinking appear to be changing the social norms in the UK towards increasing moderate and responsible enjoyment of alcohol. It should be emphasised that more than 90% of the UK adult population do already drink in moderation the majority of the time. For example, the average consumption of a UK female is a modest 9 units of 8g a week (due to new calculation methods introduced in 2008, allowing for bigger pour size and alcohol levels in wine, this has been readjusted up from 6 units).

For a detailed analysis on UK consumption trends by the Joseph Rowntree Trust, read: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/UK-alcohol-trends-FULL.pdf>

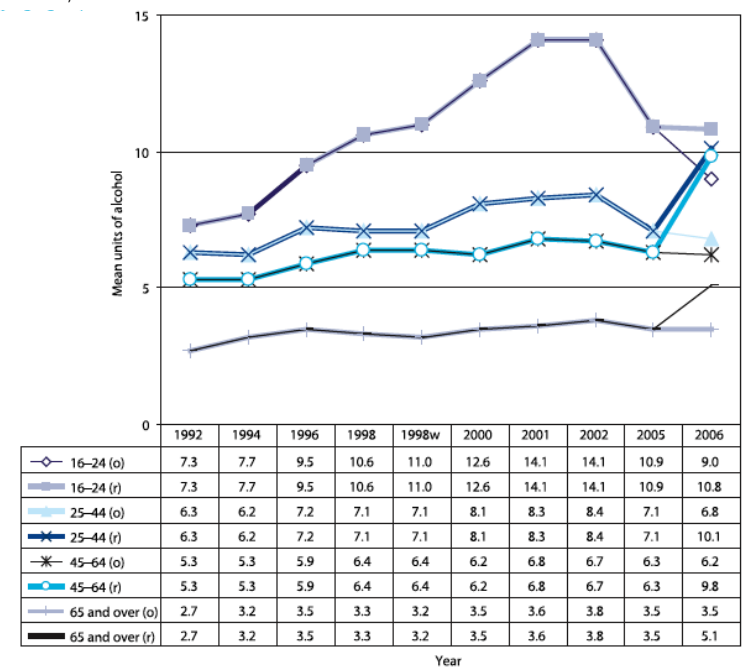
This calls into question the public health debate as to why alcohol related hospital admissions appear to be rising in the UK when consumption is declining, contrary to public health predictions that if total alcohol consumption decreased, alcohol related misuse and mortality would decrease (The Lederman theory) in proportion to the fall.

One reason is due to the new alcohol attributable fractions now used by the Department of Health, which have radically changed the calculations used by hospitals regarding the association of alcohol consumption with admissions and deaths. (Alcohol Attributable Fractions (AAFs) are annually applied to

Hospital Episode Statistics. (www.nwph.net/nwpho/Publications/AlcoholAttributableFractions.pdf).

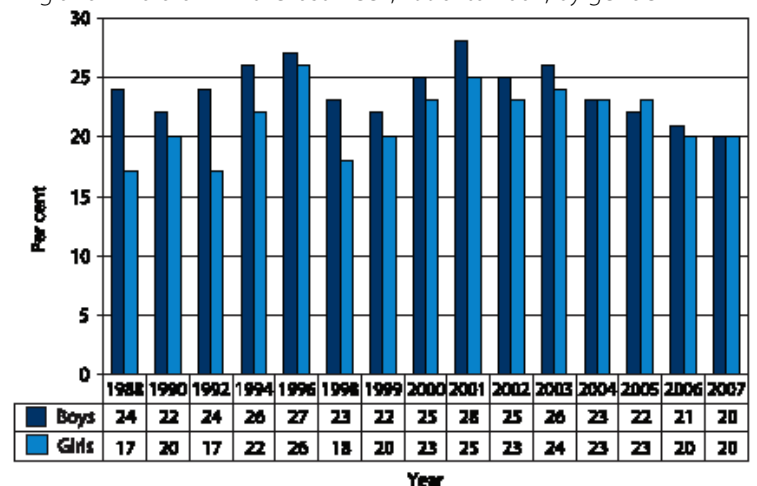
The new methods presume an automatic fraction of heart disease and late onset diabetes for example, will automatically be due to alcohol consumption, irrespective of the patients alcohol use, or pattern of drinking. Recent research (reported in AIM November 09) also suggests that obesity is set to overtake alcohol as the primary cause of cirrhosis in the UK, yet cirrhosis is automatically attributed to alcohol misuse.

Mean alcohol consumption in the last week in women in Great Britain, 1992- 2006



w = weighted; o = original method of calculating alcohol units; r = revised method of calculating alcohol units. Source: GHS, 2006 (Goddard, 2006).

Trends in the proportion of boys and girls aged 11 to 15 years in England who drank in the last week, 1998 to 2007, by gender



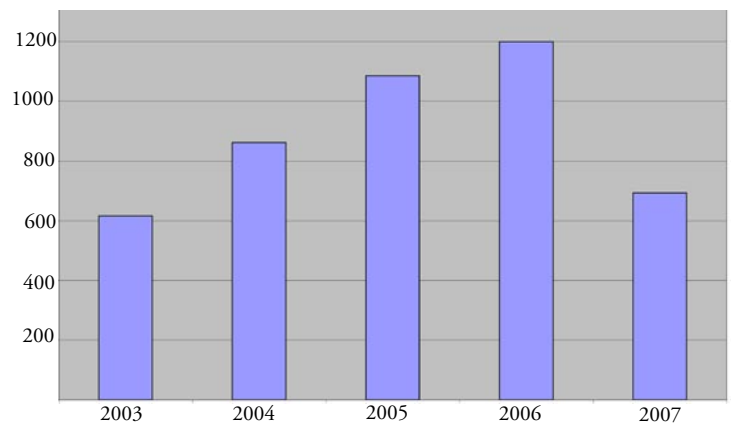


The trend in figures allows for an increasing call for an emphasis on targeted measures in the UK to specifically reduce alcohol misuse amongst the vulnerable and reoffending groups - rather than the current public health emphasis on reducing everyone's alcohol consumption, and presumption that we are all drinking to excess. These targeted approaches include measures to deter repeat drink-drivers and drink driving per se, continued successful measures to reduce underage purchase, educational outreaches to parents and school children, programmes for those dependent on alcohol and effective public private partnerships to improve the drinking environment and exclude anti social elements.

As AIM's databank on social and policy initiatives shows, (via www.alcoholinmoderation.com) many effective initiatives are in place in the UK, such as Best Bar None, Pub Watch, CAP and Challenge 21 (25) for example, offering tangible results. The balance needs to be redressed in 2010 towards recognising that most Britons enjoy drinking in moderation, to relax, socialise and unwind and that the public health goal should not

be for all to drink less, but to target those who harm themselves or others due to over consumption, or any consumption in certain circumstances.

Number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates court for selling alcohol to persons aged under 18, in England and Wales from 2003 to 2007 (Statistics for 2008 are planned for publication at the end of January 2010).



Source: Evidence and Analysis Unit-Office for Criminal Justice Reform Ref: IOS 043-09