Alcohol policies and public opinion: Five case studies on recent developments in Europe and North America

Recent developments in many parts of the world suggest that the journey ahead for those wishing to foster effective harm reduction alcohol policies will be neither smooth nor uneventful. There is a striking contrast between, on the one hand, high and rising rates of damage from alcohol and, on the other, ongoing tendencies to increase access to alcohol, promote sales and dismantle conventional control systems.

At a global level, scientific evidence shows that alcohol consumption is among the top risk factors for disease and disability (WHO, 2002). In developed countries, it has been ranked third among 26 risk factors examined, following tobacco and high blood pressure (Rehm, Rehn, Room, Monteiro, Gmel, Jernigan, and Frick 2003). There are also indications that the percentage of disability-adjusted life years linked with alcohol use increased from 1990 to 2000 (Room & Rehm, 2004).

In some European and North American jurisdictions, overall consumption has been increasing recently (Statistics Canada, 2005b). For example, in Canada, there are indications that the proportion drinking in a high-risk manner (minimum 5 drinks per occasion at least monthly) has been on the increase since the mid-1990s (Statistics Canada, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2005a).

Longitudinal studies in 14 countries in Europe and 10 provinces of Canada have demonstrated a strong relationship between overall consumption and rates of mortality over five decades (1950-2000). This relationship is evident for total mortality (Norström, 2001, 2004), alcohol-specific causes of death (Ramstedt 2002, 2004), liver cirrhosis mortality (Ramstedt, 2001, 2003), fatal accidents (Skog, 2001, 2003), homicide (Rossow, 2001, 2004) and suicide (Ramstedt 2005). In contrast, the scope and potential impact of control systems have been undermined through partial or full-scale privatization of government control systems (e.g.\[http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/section?content=a783598320&fulltext=713240928 (1 of 5) [12/8/2009 3:24:19 PM]\)
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Alberta), extension of hours of sale (e.g. the United Kingdom), reduction in real price (e.g. Finland), and relaxation of cross-border restrictions on importing alcohol for personal use (e.g. Finland; see Österberg paper in this issue.)

These developments have implications for both research and policy-making. Considered together, the five papers in this issue explore trends in alcohol-related consumption, damage, controls on alcohol and changes in public opinion on alcohol policy.

The paper by Nordlund illustrates that alcohol policy making within a jurisdiction is strongly influenced by international developments. Even in the case of Norway, which is not an EU country, the impact of the EU is evident in alcohol taxes, changes in access to alcohol and, last but not least, the obligation to dissolve its monopoly on import, export, wholesale and production of alcoholic beverages. Nevertheless, the long-standing current system is to sell most off-premise beverages through state-run stores. During the latter part of this period (1990-2004), overall support for having wine and/or spirits sold in grocery stores was high, peaking in the second half of the 1990s and declining since then. Whether or not strong public support for privatized retailing is a direct result of the influence of the EU may be difficult to demonstrate. However, as in other jurisdictions, it appears that modifying the national alcohol management system will have implications for other aspects as well, such as overall consumption and drinking patterns, as well as public opinion on alcohol policies.

A second finding is that a relaxation or erosion of alcohol controls is likely to be associated with a rise in consumption and damage—a finding that is compatible with conclusions drawn by Bruun, Edwards, Lumio, Mäkelä, Pan, Popham, Room, Schmidt, Skog, Sulkunen and Österberg (1975) and Edwards, Anderson,
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Babor, Casswell, Ferrence, Giesbrecht, Godfrey, Holder, Lemmens, Makela, Midanik, Norstrom, Osterberg, Romelsjo, Room, Simpura and Skog (1993). However, the rise and fall in public support do not necessarily parallel changes in overall consumption and damage. The relationship appears to be more complicated. As shown by Österberg (this edition), in Finland, public support of controls declined in the 1960s, thus preceding an increase in access, as in 1969 with a substantial expansion of the on-premise and off-premise networks. However, during a time when an increase in alcohol-related damage was evident, the public apparently reacted with an increase in support for alcohol control policies, as happened in the 1970s. In the 1980s public support for alcohol control measures decreased despite the increase in alcohol consumption and related harm. More recently, public support for controls has increased since the mid-1990s as access to alcohol has increased through lower taxes and a substantial relaxation of import restrictions.

A third theme is that support for alcohol policies may be stronger and more widespread than media accounts would suggest. Saltz (this collection) examines the views of college students in the United States. His findings are contrary to the expectation that most alcohol policies are met with universal opposition by this population. The random sample of students at the University of California reported a level of support for policies that was generally higher than their perception of their peers’ level of approval. This disparity was greatest for enforcement type policies—according to evaluations considered to be the most effective, where those supporting these policies incorrectly considered themselves to be in the minority. Thus, the myth of widespread opposition to effective alcohol policies had a reality that probably influenced administrators to shy away from implementing these policies.

A somewhat different conclusion emerges from the paper by Greenfield and colleagues (this issue). They
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examine public opinions on 11 alcohol policies in United States, using national samples. Their longitudinal analysis shows a gradual erosion of support for most policies from 1989 to 2000, with some exceptions. There was no significant change in support with regard to controls on television advertising of alcohol and sponsorship by alcohol producers. Opposition to alcohol sales in corner stores increased between 1991 and 2000, and support for beverage warning labels increased throughout the study period. A closer examination of the 2000 data found stronger support for alcohol policies among women and those of lower socio-economic status, while heavy drinkers were least supportive of alcohol policies. In general, there was less support for evidence-based policies, e.g. restrictions on availability, than for lower-impact policies, e.g. information and education campaigns.

Similar themes emerged from the fifth paper (Giesbrecht and colleagues, this issue). Their examination of data from three national Canadian surveys (1989, 1994 and 2004) found less support for more effective policies, such as higher taxes or fewer outlets, than for information-orientated policies—judged to be less effective from evaluation studies. Women, older respondents, lighter drinkers and abstainers were more likely to support alcohol control policies. Giesbrecht et al. also noted a decline in support over time. They hypothesize that intensive marketing and retailing of alcohol may be important factors in the generally diminished public support for alcohol control policies.

These articles all point to the need for more research on the interactions among alcohol management, alcohol consumption, alcohol-related damage and public opinion on alcohol policies. The papers provide some counter-intuitive findings, but also offer new support for the already established positive relationship between overall consumption and damage from alcohol. For those committed to reducing rates of alcohol-related damage, there are both challenges and positive signals that emerge from this collection. Erosion of controls and
extensive marketing of alcohol continue and public support for effective management seems to be in gradual decline in some jurisdictions. However, among groups such as college students, there appears to be stronger support for effective interventions than is commonly assumed. Also, as shown in the cases of Finland and Norway, public support for alcohol policy is not static. It seems to be influenced by secular changes in drinking and damage from alcohol.