

DEBATE SECTION

National Alcohol Policies in the Nordic Countries

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Should we accept that our products are treated as poison?

In the Nordic countries, we have for many decades had national policies on alcohol that are far more restrictive than seen elsewhere in Europe. Within Scandinavia, the Danish national policy has for many decades been much more liberal than those reigning in Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Finland. It is my clear impression that Denmark, to a certain extent, is seen by many as the proof that a Nordic welfare system can exist without treating alcohol as poison, and treating the citizens as irresponsible adolescents that need the ‘big brother government’ to keep them all from drinking themselves to death.

But some people still drink themselves to death in all Nordic countries. And like in all western societies, there are too many people in our countries that suffer from severe health problems caused by *alcohol abuse*. In spite of falling average annual per capita alcohol consumption in all our countries, the success rate for solving these problems has not been convincing – neither in those countries with a near-Stalinistic legislation on alcohol, nor in those with a more liberal legislation.

As these observations can fairly be summarised into the conclusion that the average per capita alcohol consumption is not the factor driving alcohol-related health problems, it is frustrating and depressing to note that the relevant authorities and the political establishments in our countries still follow that path. It clearly seems that the authorities have more or less given up the very complex and difficult task of combating the fatal phenomenon of alcohol abuse, and instead they are throwing their resources and energy into the simple, easily understandable, very visible – but still utterly inefficient as far as the objective goes – strategy of campaigning for reducing the alcohol consumption of the 95 per cent of the population that does have a moderate and healthy alcohol consumption. In Denmark, the National Board of Health very recently issued a new set of guidelines for the population, advising that if one

wants to be ‘on the safe side’ with respect to not attracting alcohol-related health problems, one should limit oneself to 7 units (1 unit = 12 grammes of alcohol = the alcohol in a standard Danish 33 cl. Pilsner beer with 4.6% ABV) of alcohol per week for women and 14 units per week for men.

These new guidelines are themselves entirely political and in sharp contrast to what the enormous body of existing scientific evidence says about the beneficial effects on the so-called ‘all cause mortality’ of an average consumption of 2-3 units of alcohol per day, but it’s further accompanied by a general statement saying that alcohol increases the risk of cancer and that ‘... there is no lower limit in terms of intake for the negative health effect of alcohol consumption’. Just one little sentence that – however untrue it is – states that alcohol is a poison in all ‘concentrations’. Call me paranoid, but, in my view, this neatly places alcohol, and thus also beer, in the unpleasant company of tobacco, illegal drugs, radioactivity, firearms, etc. Bad stuff that all responsible governments must combat at all levels in the interest of the health and safety of their populations.

Here and now, I will not even begin going into the very poorly documented positive effects of alcohol in ‘psycho-sociological’ (how alcohol in moderation positively affects our interaction with each other) and ‘mental hygienic’ (how it makes us feel in general) contexts. But in both areas, I do have very strong opinions on the substantial positive effects of alcohol in general and beer in particular. I mean: Why do we love it, drink at almost any social event, when we want to relax and/or reward ourselves for a job well done, and why has this been the case since the dawn of human civilisation? Looking alone at the very specific evidence of the positive somatic effects of moderate alcohol consumption on our physical health and our life expectancy, there’s all the reason in the world to stand up against these entirely politically motivated campaigns to make everybody drink less. Making people’s lives less enjoyable,

giving them a bad conscience whenever they drink a beer, and making their life shorter and less healthy at the same time, sounds to me like something we could all agree to fight fiercely against.

This finally brings me to the question that I really want to throw out there to start a healthy debate and hopefully spark some good ideas that will bring us forward: We – brewers and all other good people working within or on behalf of our industry – are in an extremely frustrating ‘Catch 22’ situation here. Not only do we have more at stake (like our livelihoods and one of the passions of our lives) in this debate than so many others, but we also, for very obvious reasons, know much more about the facts of the matter than so many others. Still, the more we voice our opinions and the more we try to present the facts, the more we hurt our own cause and objectives. In our modern and media-dominated societies, all interest groups actively try to influence the public opinion by ‘spin’ in all shapes and forms to the extent that this public opinion seems to react totally in opposition to the intentions of the interest groups. Especially if an interest group represents an industry, or companies within an industry, voicing anything to support this industry’s interests is met with deep suspicion, if not downright disbelief.

So, in short, anything we brewers or our organisations bring forward presenting the benefits of moderate beer consumption, is likely to fire right back at us, perhaps even convincing at lot of people that they should probably take the new, misguided guidelines onboard and start drinking less than one or two beers a day. My statements and comments here are, hopefully, enough to start the debate, but carving it in stone: Should we as an industry lay down flat on our backs and accept that our great products are treated like poison by the authorities and the media? If no, what can we do to make our voices not only heard, but believed in the public domain?

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