

Warning Labels on Alcohol beverages:

Islamic Viewpoint

Commentary on “Mandatory cancer risk warnings on alcoholic beverages: What are the ethical issues?” by Jennie Louise et al

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Louise et al presented a comprehensive review on the ethical issues associated with warning labels on alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol is responsible in the world for 1.8 million deaths **annually** and results in disability of 58.3 million people. Alcohol abuse is a major public health issue, costing the USA economy \$223 billion a year and the UK economy up to £25 billion pounds per year. Alcohol consumption is related to over 60 different medical conditions, as well as Injuries, violent offences and lost productivity at work (Awoliyi 2014). Most people know that heavy alcohol drinking can cause health problems, but many people might not know that drinking alcohol can raise their cancer risk. It is estimated that 3.6% of all cancer cases and 3.5% of cancer deaths worldwide are attributable to consumption of alcohol (Boffetta 2006). A recent study found that one in 10 of all cancers in men and one in 33 in women were caused by past or current alcohol intake. When it comes to cancer, no amount of alcohol is safe (Rehm 2014). That is the conclusion of the 2014 World Cancer Report (WCR), issued by the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC).

Alcohol warning labels that alcohol causes cancer are an increasingly popular alcohol policy initiative. Warning labels can be ineffective, but the tobacco experience suggests that effective warning labels are possible. The introduction of alcohol warning labels may increase awareness about the risks of alcohol consumption among adolescents; however, these labels appear unlikely to change adolescent drinking behaviors or beliefs about alcohol-related risks. Alcohol warning labels should be considered as only one aspect of a range of other proven strategies to change knowledge, attitudes and behavior. The development of direct health warnings; increase in visibility of the warnings; incorporation of pictorial health warnings; and consideration of plain

packaging for alcohol products could advance the case for stringent alcohol health warnings policies (Al-hamdani 2014).

What about the role of religiosity? A survey of over 1000 young people from Leicestershire (UK) revealed significant differences between ethnic groups in terms of their attitudes to alcohol consumption and the frequency of alcohol consumption. Some differences in attitudes to the consumption of alcohol were found between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, with the Muslims exhibiting particular sensitivity to their religion's proscription of drinking alcohol. However, the level of drinking by the Hindus and Sikhs was not much greater than that of the Muslims. The three groups tended to have a similar frequency of alcohol consumption which was markedly lower than that reported by the White 15-16-year-olds (Denscombe 1995).

In Israel, for example, there is an increasing exposure of the traditionally conservative Arab sector to the Western culture which might impact on the drinking patterns of these two populations. Adherence to religious traditions continues to serve as a barrier against drinking among both Arabs and Jews (Neumark 2001). Due to Muslim laws prohibiting alcohol consumption, alcohol consumption is not high, however it does exist especially among young men and when they drink they tend to drink heavily, more than the Arab Christians (Baron-Epel 2014).

In a study of 1837 Lebanese university students (Christians, Druze and Muslims), it was found that students belonging to conservative religious groups may be shielded from the opportunity to try alcohol. Once an ever drinker, however, religion is not related to the odds of an alcohol use disorder. Religiosity is, nevertheless, related inversely to alcohol-related problems, even among drinkers (Ghandour 2009).

A recent study of substance abuse in adolescents from Lebanon versus the U.S.A showed that Muslim adolescents had significantly less rates of alcohol and substance use than Christians in both Lebanon and Los Angeles. The longer they live in the U.S.A. the more the likelihood of abuse for both Muslims and Christians. Attachment to God and family was negatively associated with substance abuse (Badr 2014).

Despite the Western cultural exposure, even in those who are weak in faith, this potential understanding of Islam is very much ingrained in their inherited psyche. Malik Badri, a well-known Islamic psychologist recalls his use of this "potential power of Islam as a force of persuasion and aversion" with much success for Muslims who drink (Mufti).

The experience of most Muslim African-American community signifies the validity of Islamic approach. In the African Americans, the Islamic faith was noted to offer holistic direction for a "way of life" that promotes health and harmony of the mind, body, and soul (Ohm 2003).

The concept of label warnings on alcohol beverages is Islamically advocated since giving sincere advice enjoys a sublime and exalted position in Islam, and how could this not be so? The Prophet PBUH –as narrated by Muslim- considered the giving of sincere advice on a par with the religion as whole. He said: "Religion is giving sincere advice." A person would give sincere advice to others when he loves and sympathizes with them, when he wishes goodness for them, and when he wishes to thwart evil and harm from them.

The Islamic prohibition on alcohol was a logical final step of a well-organized plan executed over a period of 3 years in Medina, communicated by the Quran and put into practice by the Prophet. Thus the heavy drinkers were gradually weaned off this habit. One might assume that this has some resemblance to the present-day systematic desensitizing hierarchy used in behavioral therapy (Mufti).

Anas ibn Malik (the servant of the Prophet) said- as narrated by Albukhari-: “Eventually, when wine was banned, the Arabs were still loving wine, and nothing was more difficult for them than to conform to prohibition. However, they conformed well. Every one of us who had wine at his home brought it out in the street and threw it away. For many days the lanes of Medina swelled of the intoxicant liquor”. Ever since that fateful day, the majority of Muslims all over the world have abided by the prohibition, and accordingly they are among the least affected by alcoholism problems.

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