

Derek Rutherford

Address to GAPA/APAP Meeting Derek Rutherford

My first task is to congratulate the Thai Government on their foresight in establishing Thai Health and securing its finances in earmarking a percentage of excise duty for its work. It was an epoch making action and has been praised by public health advocates as an example that should be copied by their respective governments. It is an action of which the Thai Government can be extremely proud. I am also pleased to note the positive role Thai officials have played in the debate on alcohol policy at international and regional level.

We are grateful to Thai Health for their support for the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance and in particular, to Stop Drink for their invaluable assistance in arranging the consultations we are to have over next few days and for hosting the launch of the Asia Pacific Alcohol Policy Alliance.

Over the past decade the WHO has, through its research and reports, brought to international, regional and member states attention the growing problems associated with the increasing use of alcohol.

The World Health Report revealed that alcohol was responsible for 3.2% of all premature death and 4% of the global burden of disease.

No region of the globe remains unaffected by this growing epidemic of harm caused by alcohol. In developed countries it is the third most serious health risk factor, contributing 9.2% of the disease burden. In some parts of the Western Pacific Region it is responsible for 6.2% and in other parts 8.3% of the burden.

Similarly, in the South East Asia Region, it ranges from 1.6 to 6.2%.

With the addition of social harm, through alcohol related crime and disorder, domestic violence, neglect of family, child abuse, accidents, loss of productivity and poverty, a considerable economic burden is borne by society. The economic cost of alcohol to a nation has been shown by a number of studies to range from 1 to 4.5% of GDP.

More important is the pain and suffering of innocent third parties as well as that of users. When these intangibles are assessed then the social cost at least doubles the tangible economic cost.

Further evidence that, with alcohol, we are dealing with no ordinary commodity, comes in the recent ranking of twenty drugs in order of danger. The ranking was based on the criteria of physical harm, dependency and the impact on family and society. This analysis was recently submitted to the British Home Office by Professor Colin Blakemore, Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council and Professor David Nutt of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of

Drugs. Alcohol is ranked as the fifth most serious drug after heroin, cocaine, barbiturates and street methadone. Alcohol was ahead of tranquillisers and amphetamines and well

ahead of cannabis, LSD and ecstasy. Tobacco is ranked ninth. Such ranking of alcohol lends support to Thomas Babor's statement in the WHO's sponsored research book - 'Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity' - "No other product so widely available for consumer use, not even tobacco, accounts for so much disability as alcohol" .

The first priority of any government and society should be the social wellbeing and health of its people. Yet despite all the evidence there is little political will, if any, to deal with the alcohol problem. Among health ministries and authorities there is a growing awareness of the problem and the WHO has to be congratulated in initiating a wake up call for action.

In the European Union, DG Sanco is about to take a first step in political action, even though it may be modest, in its proposed alcohol strategy for Europe which should be published later this year. We have, however, a long struggle ahead of us since, with alcohol, we are dealing with not just an irresistible pleasure but massive vested interest.

In the 1980's the WHO Health for All target sent alarm bells ringing in the boardrooms of the alcohol industry to respond urgently to the perceived threat from the health lobby. Critical of what they considered to be the late and inadequate response of the tobacco industry to similar threats, they were determined to set the research agenda. The voice of the public health lobby had to be countered, but, if possible, also wooed.

In addition to exploiting globalisation, the liberalisation of trade, the consolidation of companies and the marketing of new products geared to the aspirations and affluence of young people, the alcohol industry fully embraced the concept of corporate responsibility by creating social aspect organisations. Such front organizations have increased their influence on governments to promote industry friendly policies to the detriment of public health.

Virgil, the Roman poet, in relating the story of the Trojan horse, offers some very wise words: "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.

A recent happening in the EU well illustrates the caution.

Representatives of the Industry were keen to have a roundtable discussion, under the auspices of the European Policy Centre, with officials of DG SAN CO, research experts and representatives of a few selected member states and non governmental organisations on a response to a draft paper on an Alcohol Strategy for Europe prepared by a group representing health ministries of EU Member States. Four meetings were held. At first the Industry oozed with sweetness and light and were prepared to fund an educational campaign. But at the final session they expressed disappointment at what they considered to be the unfavourable and negative outcome of the discussions. The idea of the fund was withdrawn. The reason was simple; they believed the answer to the problem was education and individual responsibility. The NGOs were not prepared to accept such a view, considering that education, without the enacting of appropriate control policies, is futile. Since NGO's wished any campaign fund to be independent of industry control and influence, the industry withdrew their offer.

At the subsequent meeting to deliver the roundtable report to Commissioner Kyprianou, Diageo announced the launch of its £1.5 million Drink Aware Campaign.

Soon after, the Brewers of Europe began lobbying the European Parliament and the media against the Commission's alcohol strategy without even knowing its contents.

The alcohol companies present at the roundtable meetings were Heineken International, Imbev, Bacardi Martini, Diageo and Pernod Ricard. In 2001, the Council of Ministers, concerned about the new designer drinks and their appeal to young people, had recommended that producers should: "Ensure that alcoholic beverages are not designed or promoted to appeal to children and young people." Despite this and their Drink Aware Campaign, Diageo, after the roundtable, also promoted its new RTD (designer drink), Quinn's Pure Fruit Drink, with a 12.4 million euro campaign.

Bacardi has added to its range of half sugar Bacardi breezers, "Bursting Blueberry" so linking in to the perceived health claims of blueberries and their popularity.

Even the V & S group, owned by the Swedish Government, has launched "Absolut Peach". However, the most insidious form of advertising is sports sponsorship which contravenes the industry's self-regulatory codes relating to sporting prowess and success.

Freeke de Wette, international sport sponsorship manager at Heineken International, reported in April 2006, "We are delighted to have extended our sponsorship of the Rugby World Cup. The Heineken brand is enjoyed in almost every country throughout the world. As such, Heineken is the perfect partner for rugby's premier global tournament." The Rugby World Cup is viewed by over 3.5 billion people across 209 countries.

Datamonitor suggests "event" drinking is a significant part of overall drinks volumes. Sponsors of the 2002 World Soccer Cup Tournament in Japan and Korea had direct access to 1 in 6 people on the planet. In preparing for this year's World Cup, David Goadby, Custom Marketing Director at Scottish and Newcastle, remarked, "Tournaments such as these are critically important for our customers.... Five times more people watch the World Cup than watch domestic football."

The adage "Beware Greeks bearing 'Gifts'" applies even more to the industry's social aspect organisations. The purpose of these bodies is to display a caring and responsible image of the industry. Their true purpose is to counter evidence-based policies that are proven to work, with the promotion of policies that have little if any proven effectiveness. They have been used, by their paymasters, to debunk the work of eminent scientific alcohol researchers who contributed to 'Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity' - a work that represents the scientific consensus on what works in the policy arena.

Social aspect organisations promote five viewpoints:

- Patterns of drinking, rather than volume of alcohol consumption, are the best basis for alcohol policy.
- Education is the cornerstone of strategies to reduce harm since responsible drinking can be learned.

- Alcohol confers a net benefit to society.
- Marketing is best self- regulated by the industry itself.
- Social aspect organisations should have an equal place at the policy table.

The first three points are not consistent with research evidence; the fourth is not true since more than sufficient evidence throughout the world has been gathered to show that, often, the rules are circumvented and the spirit *of* the code is ignored.

There is a role for industry to market their product responsibly; to comply with national rules and regulations; to provide training for those who sell and serve alcohol; to prevent the clientele from over indulgence or inappropriate drinking patterns such as drinking and driving. There is, however, no role in the formation of alcohol policy. The Declaration of the WHO European Ministerial Conference in 2001 stated: "Public health policies concerning alcohol need to be formulated by public health interests, without interference from commercial interests."

The Global Alcohol Policy Alliance is an alliance of research scientists and public health advocates working to reduce alcohol-related harm worldwide by promoting science- based policies independent of commercial interests. "

It seeks to:

- Provide a forum for alcohol policy advocates
- Bring to the attention of national governments, international governmental and non-governmental agencies and communities the social, economic, and health consequences of alcohol consumption and related. harm;
- Co-operate with national and local organizations and communities to alleviate alcohol-related problems
- Encourage international research on the social and health impact of the actions of the multinational alcohol beverage industry;
- Monitor and promote research on the impact of international trade agreements on alcohol related harm;
- Place priority on research and advocacy regarding those parts of the world where alcohol problems are increasing;
- Ensure that member groups in those areas have the technology and support capacity to participate in a global network for communication and action.

Partnership is of the essence in our work. We have a close cooperation with the WHO and are at present responsible for administering the World NGO Network on Alcohol and Public Health.

Cooperating with health bodies, research institutions and NGOs at regional level, we have, in partnership with them, established the Indian Alcohol Policy Alliance and are pleased to be present at the official launch of the Asia Pacific Alcohol Policy Alliance.

The usefulness of the GAP A's network can be seen in the support given to the effort of the USA based Center for Science in the Public Interest to eliminate alcohol promotion in world cup events. More than 263 diverse organizations from 43 nations endorsed the global resolution. Thailand contributed 86 organizational endorsers in an effort spearheaded by Stopdrink.

There is much to do. Let me finish by recalling the words of warning issued by Dr E M Jellinek, a consultant on alcoholism to the WHO over 50 years ago. It is as apposite today as it was when first made: "Either we will control alcohol or alcohol will control us".

We have allowed alcohol to get out of control; it is time to redress the imbalance.

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