Alcohol and Pleasure
A Health Perspective

edited by Stanton Peele and Marcus Grant

Executive Summary
What is the main message of this book?

The main purpose of this book is to explore the role of pleasure in alcohol consumption and its consequences for the health of individuals as well as for society as a whole. Linked to an evolving conception of health which goes beyond the simple presence or absence of disease to include a subjective sense of well-being, Alcohol and Pleasure: A Health Perspective represents a significant turn in the alcohol studies literature. Clearly there is no simple threshold between the experience of drinking and the pleasure it can bring on the one hand and the pain and suffering caused by alcohol abuse on the other. Nonetheless, the contributors to this book believe that health, quality of life, and responsible drinking are interconnected and, therefore, the motivations, expectations, and contexts of drinking (and pleasure) need to be better understood.

What are the lessons for the future?

Increasingly, evidence suggests that moderate consumption of alcohol confers physiological, psychological, and social benefits and improves an individual's quality of life. Although the existence of beneficial effects is generally recognized, what is missing from the equation is a description of beneficial drinking patterns as distinct from detrimental ones. How people drink is a part of a much broader landscape of human activity, including eating, talking, sharing time with family and friends, relaxing, and celebrating. Therefore, the function of pleasure in relation to drinking also needs to be considered in the context of many other individual, socioeconomic, and cultural variables. What is further evident in the chapters in this book is the need for the individual choice whether or not to drink to be based on accurate and balanced information. Public health advocates, scientists, physicians, governments, the media, and the beverage alcohol industry all have distinct, and sometimes overlapping, roles and responsibilities when it comes to addressing the place of alcohol in society. It is consequently recommended that the dialogue which is represented by this book be sustained as part of a partnership through which to guide the future.

How did it come to be written?

The International Center for Alcohol Policies1 (ICAP) was interested in exploring the vast territory between the pleasure of most people's drinking experiences and the tragic consequences of alcohol abuse. Some of the questions it wished to address were: How much is too much? Are there "safe" limits to drinking? Is less necessarily better? In what ways is alcohol good for you? It thus brought together an international advisory group consisting of experts from a range of countries and backgrounds to plan a conference entitled Permission for Pleasure: Alcohol and Pleasure from a Health Perspective, which took place in New York from June 28 to July 1, 1998. This book is based upon the discussion generated at that conference. It intends to do more than provide final versions of the papers presented at New York. It also tries to capture some of the creativity and energy of the many discussions that took place there in reports prepared by the rapporteurs for each session.

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1 The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) is dedicated to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promoting the understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community and others interested in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by twelve major international beverage alcohol companies.
For whom is the book intended?

This book is intended for all those with an interest in alcohol issues and, in particular, the role of alcohol in society. In the academic field, it will be relevant to a wide range of disciplines including public health, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and the medical sciences. Politicians, policy specialists and civil servants in the health, social affairs, trade, development and finance sectors as well as public health practitioners, social workers, producers and distributors of beverage alcohol, and the hospitality industry will also find the book useful.

How can the contents of the book best be summarized?

This book is divided into six parts. Part I, entitled Pleasure and Health, surveys evidence which points to pleasure as an essential element of physical and mental health and discusses the resulting implications for public health policy. Part II, Pleasure and Alcohol Cross-Culturally, provides a series of case studies examining the impact of pleasure on the nature of and trends in drinking in both the developed and the developing world. Part III, Alcohol and Medical, Psychological and Social Health, reviews the range of health benefits that are drawn from moderate consumption of alcohol and the extent to which these suggest room for positive public health recommendations on drinking. Part IV, entitled Drinking Expectations and Contexts, explores the array of non-pharmacological factors that add to, modify, or direct human reactions to alcohol, including differences based on age and gender. Part V, Pleasure and Alcohol Policy, tackles evolving conceptions of health as found in the World Health Organization's Quality of Life project. It suggests that, if pleasure is taken as an important indicator of health, there is ground for formulating more flexible alcohol policies. And, lastly, Part VI, draws Conclusions from the volume as a whole.
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