EDITORIALS AND COMMENTARIES

The UK Experiments with its Licensing Laws

David Sharp

If predictions were to be believed, the early hours of Friday, November 25, 2005, would have seen overcrowded prison cells in cities in England and Wales and urban streets awash with vomit. This did not happen. The Licensing Act 2003, which allowed bars and other outlets to extend their permitted hours for selling alcohol (even up to 24 h a day) had just come into effect. All sorts of reasons have been offered up to try to explain this absence of mayhem on city streets. For one thing, it was cold that evening; also, it was a Thursday (though the ensuing weekend brought nothing out of the ordinary for an urban Saturday night in Britain either), and the number of applications, especially for round-the-clock drink sales, had been fewer than expected or feared. There had been last-minute Parliamentary opposition to the changes, and warnings had come from medical authorities and the police, too. A government minister even conceded that an increase in violence might result. However, none of the fears have been realized. Indeed, the topic has rather dropped out of the news, which is strange because drink-related antisocial behavior remains a problem here in the UK and in cities especially.

The government's concern is, rightly, with so-called binge drinking, but this pattern is very hard to define. The hope was that by removing fixed cut-offs, a more mature attitude to drinking would develop. In Australia, for many years, a 6 PM deadline led to an undignified phenomenon known as the "six o'clock swill". Here in the UK, a cry of "Last orders" tended to be followed by a similar mad rush to the bar before the dreaded sequel "Time, gentlemen, please" was heard, typically at 11 PM. Later closing times, it is argued, will lead to more sensible, paced consumption. But not less drinking overall; no one is claiming that.

The media focus on 24-hour licenses may have distracted attention from other policies accompanying the new law—notably, the prevention of under-age drinking whereby licenses can be removed if under-18s are served and also experiments with on-the-spot fines for bad behavior. There have been opportunities for innovation. For example, a west of England town has introduced a special parked bus, staffed with police and paramedics, to handle some of the serious consequences of overindulgence. The new legislation also appears to give more weight to objections from neighbors.

Hard drinking has long been a feature of life in Britain. In 14th century London consumption of ale averaged a gallon a day. This beverage would have been a weaker brew than the typical 4% or so alcohol in modern beers and was probably safer than water at that time. In the 18th century the scourge was, of course, gin, but not everyone drowned their sorrows in it. Today, the drink of choice is more likely to be lager or chardonnay. Averages for consumption will always bury

Sharp is a contributing editor with *The Lancet*, London and New York.

Correspondence: David Sharp, *The Lancet*, USA. (E-mail: david@sharp4857.fsnet.co.uk)

extremes, but the fact is that the UK does not head the European league table of annual alcohol consumption. World Health Organization data, admittedly for 2001, show the UK sitting around the average for Europe as a whole,¹ and average annual consumption was steady at 10 l (ethanol) for the 20 years leading up to 2001.²

Policy-making in this area will never be driven by science. All we can do now is monitor routinely collected data sets such as police statistics on rowdy and violent urban behavior and hospitals' accident-and-emergency figures. My own prediction would be "no better, no worse," and the Licensing Act may prove to be irrelevant to the very real problem of excessive drinking, especially by young people in cities at the weekend, and the consequences of that, long-term medical and short-term social.

REFERENCES

1. Rehn N, Room R, Edwards G. Alcohol in the European region—consumption, harm and policy. WHO European region, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2001. <http://www.who.dk/document/E76240.pdf> (accessed Dec 14, 2005).
2. WHO European Region. Country profile: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/en/united_kingdom.pdf (accessed Dec 14, 2005).