

Alcohol, body and mind

The health problems caused by alcohol abuse have long been recognised and described. Cirrhosis of the liver was one of the first diseases whose connection to alcohol was recognised. The word cirrhosis originates from the Greek for 'tawny' and refers to the characteristic colour of a cirrhotic liver.

More recently many illnesses have been associated with excessive drinking. A recent Alcohol Health Alliance report has shown that seven types of cancer are associated with alcohol. Of particular concern in recent years has been the steep increase in the death rate from alcohol-related illness in the UK.

Encouraging sobriety

Reformers over the centuries have wished to discourage drunkenness, whether for health, religious or social reasons. The 19th century temperance movement was seen as a way to optimise industrial productivity, guard against poverty, protect women and children as well as encourage churchgoing. In the beginning temperance organisations allowed beer drinking, but later outlawed all alcoholic drinks, encouraging followers to 'sign the pledge'.

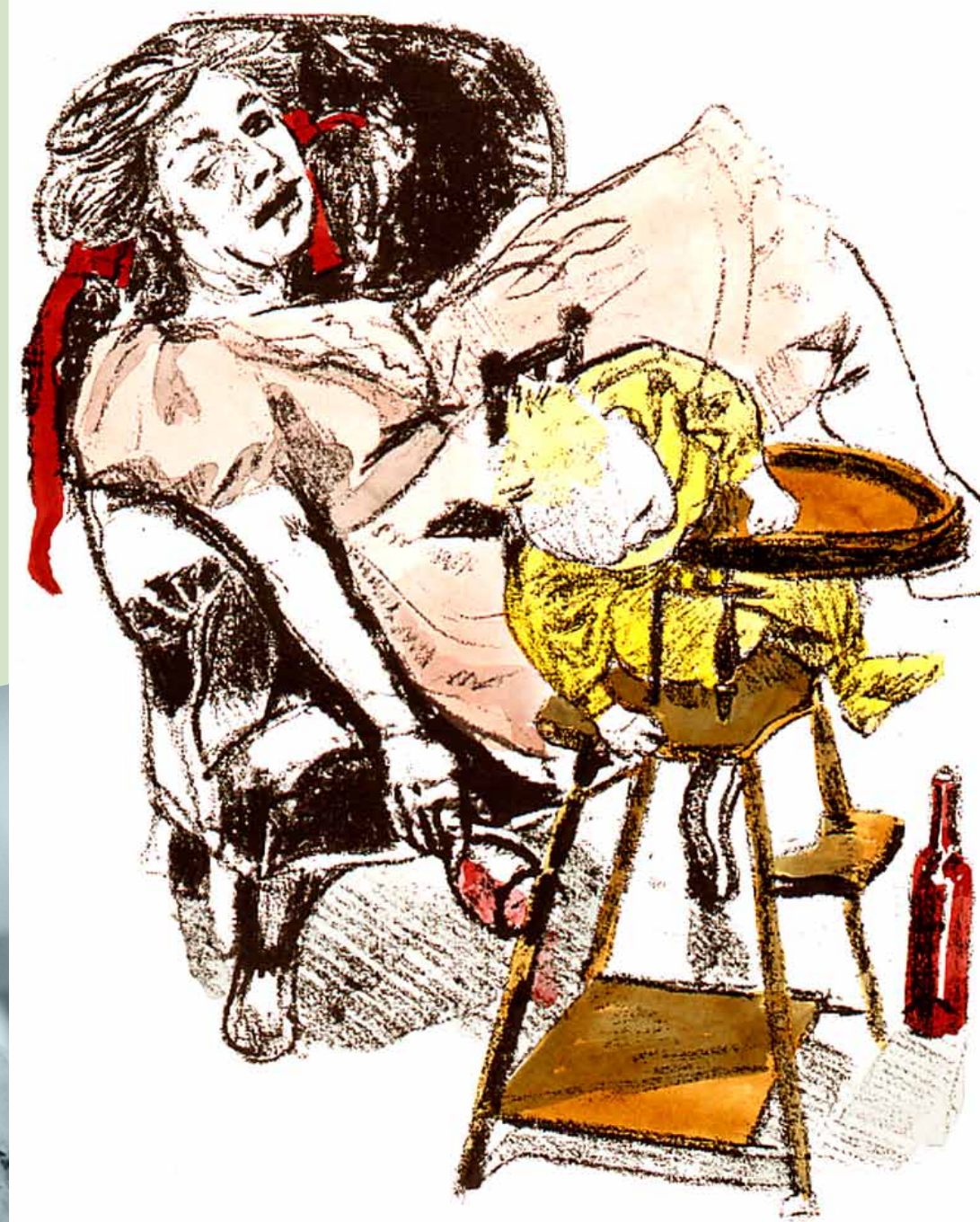
The future

Campaigners believe that the government needs to take more responsibility for alcohol advertising by the drinks industry. Children are particularly susceptible and studies have shown that they can recognise many major drinks brands.

Alcoholic drinks are toxic and harmful, and yet their advertising is remarkably lightly regulated. Drinks manufacturers use ingenious campaigns to advertise their products, many of which target young people. They are also making the most of opportunities to advertise drinks on social media – as yet unregulated.

'How we re-normalise alcohol in our society is one of our biggest challenges.'

Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, liver specialist



Original artwork © Paula Rego. Image courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, London



Image © Wellcome Library, London

'This bewitching poison'
Alcohol and the Royal College of Physicians
13 January – 27 June 2014

Evening lecture: From gin palace to temperance hall
18 March 2014, 6pm

Join history of medicine experts Richard Barnett and James Nicholls to explore London's turbulent drinking past and present.

Weekend open days
14–15 June 2014, 10am–5pm

Join us for free curator talks, family activities and Medicinal Garden tours.

London walking tours
Take a stroll down 'Gin Lane' to discover the fascinating story of London and alcohol.

Free first Friday tours
Join us on the first Friday of every month at 2pm for a 30-minute tour of the RCP.

Free first Wednesday Medicinal Garden tours
Join us on the first Wednesday of every month (March to November) at 2pm for a tour of the RCP's acclaimed Medicinal Garden.

www.rcplondon.ac.uk/bewitchingpoison

Free entry

Royal College of Physicians, 11 St Andrews Place, Regent's Park, London NW1 4LE.

Open Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm, free entry.

Library, Archive and Museum Services
Tel: +44 (0)20 3075 1543
Email: history@rcplondon.ac.uk

www.rcplondon.ac.uk/museum-and-garden

Step free access. Closed: weekends, public holidays and for RCP ceremonies – call us or see website for details.

Location: 5 minutes walk from Great Portland Street and Regent's Park, 10 minutes walk from Warren Street underground stations.



@RCPLondon #BewitchingPoison



'This bewitching poison'

Alcohol and the Royal College of Physicians

13 January – 27 June 2014

An exhibition exploring 300 years of drinking history through the work of artists, doctors and satirists.



www.rcplondon.ac.uk/bewitchingpoison

Alcohol has been associated with celebration, merriment, addiction and illness for centuries. It is part of everyday life for most people in Britain today.

From the 'gin craze' in the 1700s to minimum unit pricing debates today, our exhibition tells stories of drinking: excess and temperance, celebration and destitution, freedom and restriction, and disease and cure.

Discover how doctors, campaigners, artists and satirists charted the pleasures and pitfalls of wine, beer and spirits and the ways in which the government and the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) responded – with far-reaching implications for us all today.

www.rcplondon.ac.uk/bewitchingpoison



Image © Museum of London

From beverage to medicine

Britain is historically a beer-drinking nation. The Roman invasion of 43 AD introduced wine to Britain, establishing rituals around its consumption and setting the pattern for the country's diverse drinking habits.

Much later, physicians such as George Cheyne, acknowledged both the positive and negative effects of wine, expressed by his phrase 'this bewitching poison ...'. Cheyne advocated drinking wine in moderation and the usefulness of wine as a tonic. However he viewed spirits purely as medicinal:

'Strong liquors ... are ... prescribed by physicians to refresh the weary, to strengthen the weak, to give courage to the faint-hearted, and raise the low-spirited.'

An essay of health and long life, 1724

Beer and ales

The drink of ordinary people throughout early English history was ale, made from fermented grain, but no hops.

The addition of hops to ale produced beer, a stronger drink that stored better. This change occurred around 1400 with the arrival of Flemish weavers and brewers to England. Beer became even stronger in the 19th century when brewing was industrialised, leading to concerns about drunkenness amongst working men.

Ale and beer were seen as healthy drinks and a staple part of the diet of working people in Britain. It was only during the 19th century that water became reliably safe to drink in London and other cities.



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Wine and spirits

In Britain, wine drinking has long been associated with high social class. This has its origins in Roman times, when aristocrats imported wine. The conquered British drank ale.

From the 16th century, wine was recommended as a health-giving drink or a treatment for particular conditions. Dr Peter Shaw, writing in 1724 said: 'The vine ... is generally overlook'd both by botanists and physicians; and its juice, one of the noblest medicines in nature'.

Even today there is no consensus amongst experts as to whether drinking small quantities of red wine has cardiovascular benefits.

Gin is a spirit infused with juniper berries and was often called 'jenever', 'geneva' or 'Madam Geneva'. In Britain, the rise in gin drinking followed the arrival of Dutch monarch William of Orange in 1688. Before this it was uncommon for the British to drink spirits. Brandy had been available at a price, but as a result of war with France, the new king banned its import. Dutch gin however was widely available.

By 1724 gin was considered to be a major cause of drunkenness, poverty, crime and prostitution. The RCP was so worried that fellows wrote a petition against the 'pernicious and growing use of spirituous liquors'.

Alcohol as medicine

Historically there has been little distinction between the use of alcohol as a beverage and as a medicine. In 16th-18th century handwritten household recipe (or 'receipt') books, instructions for the preparation of remedies sit side by side with those for food and drink.

Spirits are excellent carriers for herbs as they act as a solvent and a preservative. For example, the juniper in gin was thought to be protective against the plague and other infections.

Alcoholic preparations were sold in apothecaries' shops as tinctures or cordials to be taken in small quantities – drops or drams. However there was a risk that such medicine became an addiction:

'A little lowness requires drops, which pass readily down under the notion of physick; drops beget drams and drams beget more drams, till they come to be without weights and without measure ...'

An essay of health and long life, 1724



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