Attitudes towards drinking

B. RITSON and M. DE ROUMANIE

Alcoholism as a word no longer appears in the International Classification of Diseases. The term alcoholism may have outlived its usefulness and is largely dismissed in the 1980 WHO Expert Committee report. We are not concerned here with the theoretical debate about the meaning of the term or the relevance of a disease concept — see, for instance, Room. We are simply concerned with recognizing that alcoholism, whatever its status as a scientific concept, is part of the label attached to many organizations concerned with alcohol related problems and is a term well implanted in the public mind along with other descriptions of drinking behaviour and problems. The study reported concerns, reported public attitudes toward drinking and alcohol related problems and we would like to use it as a jumping off point for discussion of the use of the term ‘alcoholism’ in describing clinical facilities.

The findings discussed here formed part of a larger study of the community response to alcohol related problems. This research was coordinated by WHO and took place simultaneously in Mexico, Zambia and Scotland. Here we shall be concerned simply with the Scottish component of the project and focus on the attitudes toward drinking and alcohol problems which were reported by the population studied.

METHOD: GENERAL POPULATION SURVEY

A structured interview questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the other centres involved in the study. The main areas covered in this questionnaire were:

(1) Basic demographic and health data,

(2) Drinking Patterns
   (a) frequency, quantity, beverage type
   (b) drinking history focusing on past week
(c) consequences of drinking and possible problems arising  
(d) attitudes towards drinking, functions of alcohol and uses of alcohol which were construed as deviant — the subject of this paper.

The instrument was pretested and piloted. A team of experienced interviewers employed by Systems Three Scotland Ltd was trained, and the interviewing was conducted during the period July–November 1978 and January–February 1979. (We avoided Hogmanay and Christmas which would clearly have proved atypical.) A total of 1007 interviews was obtained — 608 men and 399 women — aged 17 and over and residing in Lothian; the average interview lasted 45 minutes.

The sample was originally drawn to produce a stratified random sample of 1250 respondents (750 men and 500 women). It was planned to weight the sample in this way because we knew men had more personal drinking problems than women. The sample was drawn using the electoral register as a source of households to contact. Within each of these a single respondent was selected by the Kish Method, a system which allowed each individual in the household an equal chance of selection. We hoped that this strategy would enable us to interview those adults commonly not on the register (such as 17- and 18-year-olds excluded in error and those who frequently change address or are of no fixed abode).

Identifying characteristics were removed from all questionnaires and confidentiality assured. Of the 1573 addresses attempted, 67 proved to be in vacant premises and 81 addresses had to be removed from the sample as a result of our method of respondent selection which specified sex of respondent to be interviewed at each address. The sample base therefore finally numbered 1425 addresses and from these 1007 interviews were obtained. Three hundred and three contacts refused to participate and there were 115 non-contacts.

**FINDINGS**

**Reasons for drinking**

All drinkers were asked to indicate the relative importance of a number of reasons for drinking. Their responses are summarized in Table 47.1. By far the most popular reasons for drinking were ‘to celebrate’ and ‘to be sociable’. Male drinkers attached more importance to all reasons for drinking — this was particularly evident amongst the heaviest drinkers who, perhaps not surprisingly, could advance most good reasons for their habit.

The differences in the importance of particular reasons between men and women were quite wide. Younger people and particularly young women attached somewhat greater importance to the relaxing properties of alcohol. We found that the more socially disadvantaged gave more salience to drinking for escapist reasons — for instance, to change mood, give confidence and relieve tension. Social classes I and II, on the other hand, stressed more positive pleasurable reasons for drinking. It was particularly interesting that