

A Quick Rant on the Temperance Movement

- **Andy Peay**

I have been tracking the reports and studies on alcohol and health emanating from gov't bodies (US, WHO, NASEM) over the past few years. Conflicting and vague messages abound as data and research is either lacking, poorly gathered, or does not make the point funders and governing bodies wish them to make but nonetheless feel compelled to make. In that vein, there has been a loud, well-publicized campaign bombarding the media waves over the past year. The message? Alcohol is bad. In any amount. Doesn't matter what form it comes in (wine, beer, spirits). Less is better. None is best.

Is this position based on scientific evidence? No. Well, at least mostly, no. People who suffer alcoholism and its effects clearly should not drink. Just like people with diabetes should avoid sugar. Their bodies cannot process it well. They should avoid it for the sake of their health and the relationships in their lives. For alcohol, there is no safe amount for people who are addicted as they cannot stop at one or two drinks (considered moderate consumption). For others, they lack the enzymes necessary to process alcohol and feel the effects more acutely and for longer leading to dangerous situations. How about the other 99% of people who are able to enjoy beverages that contain alcohol in moderation? Can they have a drink without suffering negative repercussions? There is some debate about that because there is zero – no – research on moderate consumption. All studies lump in health outcome statistics from heavy drinking with moderate drinking and then make claims about the risk of moderate consumption. Heavy drinkers tend to be smokers, to be obese, to exercise less, and so on. Moderate drinkers? Not so, and quite the opposite. According to one research paper, moderate drinkers tend to have healthier eating habits, exercise more often, and have greater wealth, which is also positively correlated with better health outcomes. A recent statement warned of the increased risk of breast cancer in women who drink one or more alcoholic beverages per day every day. The increased relative risk is very small (12% chance for all women increases to 12.84%) but there appears to be some scientific basis. How about the studies that claim moderate drinking lowers the risk of coronary heart disease (10-30% lower risk), the #1 killer of Americans (20% share of mortality)? The data behind that conclusion may be confounded by healthier lifestyles of moderate drinkers listed above, but the claim has stood the test of time.

None of the data or studies touch on the sociological benefits of moderate consumption, specifically, the increased socialization, relaxation, and stress relief experienced while consuming moderate amounts of alcohol. The isolation and lack of social ease among Americans is dire these days, particularly among younger generations. The links among social isolation, depression, and negative health outcomes are strong and increasingly

well-studied. Do you need to drink to socialize and to relax? No, of course not. Do you need to avoid alcohol to be an overall healthy and responsible person? No, of course not.

Moderation has clearly been shown, in almost every aspect of life, to be the most sustainable and healthiest option for humans. You don't want to drink alcohol because you don't like how it makes you feel or behave or you genetically have a high risk of breast cancer or risk of alcoholism? That is a personal decision, and I support everyone's right to make whatever decision they want for themselves. Just please don't tell others what to do based on health claims that are inaccurate, biased, and/or misleading. There are costs to our health, and to our general well-being, from that message, as well.