



PART 7 ▶ Student pages

The damaging effects of alcohol

By Arif Khan

THE PASSING AWAY of alcoholic football legend George Best in the same week as a change in licensing laws coming in to affect, brought alcohol and its effects into the media spotlight. Christmas also is a time when large volumes of alcohol are consumed. As Muslims, we are told to avoid alcohol in the Holy Qur'an. The society around us and the media portray all alcoholic drinks and associated activities as full of fun and enjoyment, but at what cost? Just what is Islam shielding us from?

Alcohols are an organic chemical group containing a particular functional group. They are used extensively as solvents, in particular ethanol, and are present in a range of medicines and drugs in small quantities. When people refer to alcohol in an everyday sense they almost always mean 'ethanol'. Ethanol is a drug known to have a depressing effect that decreases responses to the central nervous system. In drinks this means alcoholic drinks have a mind altering affect on those consuming them. In Western culture alcoholic drinks can be found everywhere from weddings to funerals and they are present at almost all social functions. At what cost does this come? Is alcohol being consumed more now in Britain than the previous decades? Are there any affects of this on the health service? These issues and more will be examined below to expound the wisdom contained in the Holy Qur'an protecting the Ummah from these ills.

Teenage Drinking

Teenagers are consuming twice as much alcohol as they did 15 years ago. Despite it being illegal for children under the age of 18 to purchase alcohol, 50% of children aged between 15 and 16 interviewed for a BBC documentary said they had been drunk in the last month. Even more worryingly, a similar number said that they had first been drunk at the age of 13 or younger.

18 year old Dan Bent is serving a 12 month community rehabilitation order following pleading guilty to taking part in a drunken brawl. Dan is now trying to give up alcohol having been drinking since the age of 13 and consuming around 300 units of alcohol a week, despite the maximum recommended number for adult males being 21 units a week. He has been having black-outs and there is a possibility that he has done long-term damage to his health. He is waiting for the results of a brain scan.

Alcohol related violence amongst the youth is a huge problem. It is estimated that 1,000 youngsters a week, aged between 15 and 25, suffer serious facial injuries due to drunken assaults. It also seems apparent that more underage children are buying alcohol using fake ID cards. Police Officer Pete Sinclair who gives courses on spotting fake ID's comments:

"Youngsters are prepared to go to any lengths to get into a licensed premises and obtain alcohol. There has been a definite increase in the use of these cards and the



amount of youngsters consuming alcohol on a regular basis. We are talking about serious amounts of alcohol—well over the recognised limits for adults"

Binge Drinking

These statistics show a worrying trend, but it's not just the youngsters who partake in so called "binge drinking". Professor Cary Cooper, an expert in Britain's alcohol culture, is of the opinion that things have got noticeably worse over the last 5 to 10 years.

"Over the last five or 10 years, I think we've seen a change in people's consumption of alcohol. Binge drinking is going on about three days, usually a Thursday, Friday, Saturday night and going for about seven hours."

Interestingly, one big factor for this, according to Professor Cooper, is the increasing carefree attitude of the youth and young adults and their “enjoy life while it lasts” approach to such issues. Thus drinking can be seen as one of the social ills present due to a lack of understanding and responsibility, which are seen when a society turns its back on religion. The social cost of this binge drinking is that across the country on weekend nights high streets and town centres are transformed into alcoholic theme parks where violence is common place.

Medical Affects

1 in 100 babies are said to be damaged by alcohol due to their mothers drinking during pregnancy. A group of these illnesses are known as FASD (foetal alcohol spectrum disorder) and are now believed by experts to be caused by having as little as a couple of drinks while pregnant¹. FASD can cause mental retardation, facial deformities, stunted physical and emotional development, behavioural problems, memory and attention deficits, impulsiveness, an inability to reason from cause to effect, a failure to comprehend the concept of time and an inability to tell reality from fantasy. Secondary disabilities develop over time because of problems adapting to the environment.

One of the major medical complaints as a result of continual excessive drinking is liver disease. This used to be a disease found in people of old age, but worryingly this trend is changing to affect younger people. In 1992 the average age of diagnosis was 69, but this has now fallen sharply to only 49. Often only when the liver starts to fail do people realise the damage their drinking habits have done. Liver transplants are available, but 70% of those in rehabilitation to give up alcohol

go in to relapse so hospitals are very careful about who to offer the operation to. At the Royal Free Hospital, patients have to have been alcohol free for 6 months and sign a contract not to drink again.

One patient, 44 year-old Matt, is currently recovering from an alcoholic problem.

“I drank because I enjoyed it. It wasn’t a problem as far as I was concerned. I know now that it was, but I didn’t see it then.”

By the time he accepted he had a problem, it was almost too late. While awaiting treatment he was still drinking and ended up in hospital with liver failure.

As Muslims we owe a very large debt to this Qur’anic injunction banning us from consuming alcohol and thus protecting us from so many of these ills that are only fully being appreciated in the modern age.

Financial Cost

Even those who do not drink are paying for the excessive drinking of others.

Heavy drinking in England and Wales is estimated to cost the tax payer around £18bn a year². With figures of alcohol abuse increasing this figure is only set to increase. Hospitals have reported that the number of children admitted because of drinking alcohol has increased 11% since the mid-1990s³.

Alcohol is estimated to cost the NHS in the UK £3bn per year.

Summary

All of these factors combined show us the huge detrimental affects of alcohol. The social, physical, mental, financial and social impact of alcohol is a great cause of concern for those aware of how widespread the problem is. The World Health Organization has identified alcohol as the third highest risk to health in developed countries behind tobacco and high blood pressure⁴. Perhaps the most worrying footnote to these figures is that whilst numbers of smokers are on the decrease this is not the case, as we have seen, with consumption of alcohol. Alcohol consumption is increasing and its victims are becoming younger.

The wisdom of the Qur’anic injunction is now more beautiful than ever. The Holy Qur’an does talk of the “benefit of wine”, and this too has been discovered with recent studies showing that in very limited cases a small amount of alcohol consumption can reduce the risk of heart disease in women. The Holy Qur’an goes on to explain that the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages, and we have seen these in detail. Even in the study showing decrease in heart disease, when small amounts of alcohol were consumed an increase risk of cancer was noted as a side effect.

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Unless otherwise stated, all references taken from five part BBC Series “Britain’s Streets of Booze”.

Footnotes

1. BBC News—13th September 2004, ‘Any Alcohol’ a risk in pregnancy,
2. BBC News—9th September 2005, “Alcohol treatment cost effective”
3. BBC News—1st August 2005, “Hospitals see child drinking rise”
4. Ibid