



**Talk for the Cleraun Media in Ireland Conference
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**“Message in a Bottle: How Clear is Your Conscience?”
By; Rolande Anderson**

Introduction:

I am delighted to have been asked to speak at this prestigious conference on such an important topic. I want to start by congratulating the organisers on their theme of professional integrity.

In 2001, I delivered a paper at the World GP conference in Durban. In one of the plenary sessions, Dr. Wendy Orr addressed the five thousand delegates on her time working as a prison doctor in apartheid South Africa¹. Her job was to certify that almost exclusively black prisoners were ‘fit’ for further beatings and she described the scenes in stark images of wicked cruelty. She refused to co-operate and ‘blew the whistle’. I remember her saying that it wasn’t a case of bravery but rather it simply had to be done. After a standing ovation she challenged all of us to go out there and blow the whistle on wrong doings and injustice in our own countries. It made me think – a lot!

What has Wendy Orr in South Africa and my topic got to do with each other?! Well journalists are the best whistle blowers I know and alcohol is at the root cause of many fundamental problems within our society including public disorder and domestic violence, workplace accidents, physical and mental health problems, and depression and suicide.

Why was I asked to deliver this talk? I like to believe it is because of my commitment to this area of work. The treatment of alcohol problems is my life work and I have a lot to say. I strongly believe that the media have important roles to play including the highlighting of specific problems and in influencing policy makers. I want you to know that I am not coming from an unbiased position.

Although alcohol brings benefits to this country in terms of employment, tourism and revenue returns, I want to highlight the opposite story and argue that the negative human costs are intolerable in a caring society and that our binge culture must be changed. I believe we need to change the amounts we drink and the style in which we drink. If we could achieve even small changes in these areas they would result in great benefits to the health and welfare of the nation. Alcohol abuse has caused extensive damage to individuals, families, communities and indeed the whole country. I would want to see a society with greater moderation around alcohol use and one that actively protects young people from the dangers of alcohol and drugs.

In choosing the title I am not pointing the finger in any way but rather asking the question; “How clear is your conscience?”, which is of course taken from the ‘Smirnoff Ice’ ad. In this context it is a challenge to journalists and other media personnel. Do you feel you are doing enough to combat the problems created by alcohol abuse? The same question should of course be asked of many other professions including Social Workers, Doctors, the Gardai, the Drinks Industry and Politicians. The field of alcohol policy is complex and there are many vested interests at work. “Message in a bottle” is taken from the ‘Police’ song and in this context is a play on words. Messages about alcohol are delivered to us by vested interests and by reporters in all areas of the media.

Context;

The previous decade or so has seen unprecedented growth in alcohol consumption in Ireland with corresponding increases in all of the indices of alcohol related consequences. Between 1989 and 1999 for example, overall alcohol consumption per capita has risen by a staggering 41%². In the year 2000, the total alcohol consumption per adult was 14.2 litres of pure alcohol³. In most other European countries consumption has actually dropped over the previous decade⁴. The so called 'designer' drinks account for a significant part of the Irish increase and of course they are primarily targeted at young people⁵. Irish 15 and 16 year olds are at the top of the international league for drinking alcohol and Irish girls of this age are at the very top of the league for binge drinking⁶. Please remember that binge drinking in a European context means more than 5 drinks on any one occasion.

Behind these raw statistics are serious short and long term consequences for our population. A number of examples that can be evidenced;

- Medical;

In a pilot study conducted by the Mater hospital, one in four patients attending Accident and Emergency are alcohol related. This study also revealed that approx 13% are clinically intoxicated⁷. Unpublished figures indicate that they might even be much higher than this. I was asked by a journalist from The Examiner, I think, last year during a strike at A+E, if "we could solve the bed crisis in our hospitals by solving our alcohol problem?" I replied that it was too simplistic a solution at the time but actually now I am convinced that if we concentrated on sorting out our national alcohol problem we would free up vast resources within our health services. A study conducted by ourselves in the Irish College of General practitioners gave similar results to the Mater study and showed that over 20% of patients randomly assessed in ten different General Practices were drinking in a hazardous, harmful and/or dependent fashion.⁸

There are strong links too between alcohol use, unintentional and unprotected sex and sexual assaults. During the last decade sexually transmitted infections have gone up by a staggering 165%.⁹

- Interpersonal Violence;

Excessive drinking increases the risk of drunkenness, fights, assaults and violence¹⁰. More than 210 alcohol related crimes were committed in Ireland every day in the 18 months up to August 2003 according to Garda statistics¹¹. However the good news is that 'Operation Encounter' seems to be helping to reduce alcohol related crime.

Operation Encounter is a Garda initiative that was set up in February 2002 to tackle alcohol related violence on the street. Resources must continue to be made available to help the Gardai to further reduce the cost and suffering caused by such alcohol related violence.

Figures related to domestic violence are much harder to come by and to be verified. However every Social Worker in the country can relate its significance in their day to day work. We know that alcohol abuse is a factor in the breakdown of 34% of marriages¹².

- Mortality:

Alcohol is associated with at least 30% of Road Traffic Accidents and 40% of all fatal accidents¹³.

There are well established tragic links between alcohol, attempted suicide and suicide. Indeed there is still a great deal of ignorance amongst the general public about the causative links between alcohol and depression. In simple terms alcohol helps to 'cure' depression only in the short term but in the long term it makes it much worse. Trying to 'self medicate' with alcohol tends to create two problems. Prof. Ad Kerkhof, speaking at the Irish Association of Suicidology, linked our suicide rates (alarmingly high particularly among young men) with binge drinking.¹⁴ Regular drinking increase the risk of liver cirrhosis, cancer of the throat, mouth and oesophagus¹⁵. Alcohol abuse is also implicated in a wide range of other medical problems.

There are also a range of other alcohol related problems that can be clearly demonstrated. Alcohol related absenteeism and 'presenteeism' are serious problems in workplaces in this country. Presenteeism is a relatively new term that indicates the person may be at work in body but absent in every other sense, due to hangovers. Obviously these issues have important negative consequences for health and safety at work. Alcohol Dependence is one of the highest causes of admissions to psychiatric hospitals and there has been a significant growth in dedicated private, non psychiatric treatment centres throughout this country over the past twenty years.

The list of alcohol related harm to individuals, communities and society in general, is endless. About one quarter of the population is drinking above sensible limits¹⁶. The financial cost of alcohol related problems to Irish society in 1999 was put at 1.9 Billion Irish Punts¹⁷. The cost in terms of human suffering is incalculable.

In my opinion, the Drinks Industry has used their considerable marketing resources to normalise heavy drinking in Ireland. Anyone who cares about the considerable damage done by alcohol abuse, as already starkly set out, will realise that the key issue is to change public attitudes to heavy drinking. In this regard journalists and the media in general have a significant part to play.

Alcohol in the Media;

Alcohol is in front of us every day of the week in retail outlets including supermarkets, bars, restaurants and grocery stores. Most homes have stockpiles too. It is in every media outlet as well; billboards, notices, T.V. and Radio, the press in general and magazines in particular and on the internet. It is presented to us, in ads, on documentaries and in promotions (hats, tee –shirts, cups etc). We can't watch sport these days on the television without reference to alcohol; thus we have seen the Guinness all-Ireland, the Budweiser Derby, The Murphy's Irish Open, the Carlsberg Premiership and the Heineken European Cup in rugby. In fact, sponsorship has become one of the main marketing techniques of the industry and sport and the media gain considerable revenue from it. It is no surprise to me that they tend to focus on the most popular sports to heighten their appeal and to normalize the association between sport and alcohol. A cursory look back at the FA cup finals in England from the seventies and a comparison with the modern age will show the proliferation of alcohol advertising within sport these days. In those days only the colours of the teams were evident nowadays the colours of the teams' sponsors and the advertising hoardings predominate.

Alcohol is also presented on television through the 'Soaps' and other dramas and with a few notable exceptions rarely portray the negative sides of alcohol consumption and seldom hammer home public health messages. The tobacco industry can teach us much about the methods used to promote commodities that can harm health. In particular their abilities in the past to place products in film and TV need to be carefully watched. We also have the recent phenomenon of alcohol sponsored programmes such as 'Sex in the city'.

Articles appear in the print media outlining horror stories related to alcohol. There are also articles from time to time which try to challenge double standards in relation to alcohol and drugs. For example, an excellent piece focused on the 'drink drugs' divide and the hypocrisy around their use in our society¹⁸. In this article the journalist writes about the furore over a presenter admitting to the use of "recreational drugs" as opposed to the tacit acceptance of someone appearing drunk on a show.

From time to time we get coloured supplements heavy with drink industry sponsorship and/or advertisements.

There are of course codes of conduct and self regulation by the industry as to what is acceptable in advertisements about a product that is "no ordinary commodity"¹⁹.

Lately too we have seen some 'counter advertising' in all the media. One of the most effective is the advertisement from the Dept of Health and Children depicting the consequences of drunk driving. There are also advertisements from the Drinks Industry on sensible Drinking and safe driving.

Alcohol in the Media - A commentary:

Without doubt the marketing of alcohol products is big business. The Centre on Alcohol Marketing and Youth estimates that the total spend by the Alcohol Industry in the USA for all forms of alcohol promotion and advertising amounted to \$5.7 billion in 2002(!)²⁰ Imagine what that amount of money would do for our health services. I could not get up to date accurate figures for Ireland but in the year 2000 the spend was approx €31 million for advertising in the main media outlets (i.e.; this accounts for press, radio, TV, outdoor and cinema) but does not include sponsorships, product placement, internet or other promotions²¹.

With so much money spent on selling the products produced by the Drinks Industry the question must be asked – "What are the effects of advertising/marketing on people?" – And on young people in particular. We now have a considerable amount of evidence to comment authoritatively on the subject. "Brand characters such as Budweiser frogs and celebrity endorsements are particularly effective with the young. Research shows that advertisements do not need to show heavy drinking and intoxication for this to be assumed by young viewers to be occurring ----. Harmful drinking is not shown, supporting an inference that drinking is non problematic"²². A Dept. of Health publication – "The impact of Alcohol Advertising on Teenagers in Ireland" concludes that – "...alcohol advertising is likely to have a greater impact among the younger age groups and the 15-17 year olds ----. The younger group is particularly vulnerable, given that they perceive the advertising messages as saying that alcohol can help them have fun, make friends and become popular and those that don't drink miss out"²³. It also states that girls see alcohol as a way to increase self confidence²⁴. Not surprising then that the Alcohol Task group recommends changes in alcohol advertising regulations. Their interim report recommends limits to the exposure of children to alcohol advertising and to where such advertising is placed amongst other measures²⁵. I would prefer to see a total ban on advertising of alcohol products and the complete ban of alcohol sponsorship of sports events. As tobacco advertising is banned I see no reason why alcohol should be treated any differently.

In France, the links between alcohol and sport are prohibited thus the referee in the Heineken cup matches broadcast from France can only display 'H cup' on his jersey as opposed to 'Heineken Cup' in other jurisdictions. Even our much slated National Alcohol Policy recognised that countries with bans and partial bans of advertising have lower alcohol consumption and lower alcohol related problems²⁶. International research backs this up too, "Countries with a ban on spirits advertising had 16% lower alcohol consumption levels and 10% fewer motor vehicle fatalities than countries with no such ban". Countries with bans on beer, wine and spirits advertising had 11% lower alcohol consumption levels and 23% fewer motor vehicle fatalities than countries with spirits advertising bans alone²⁷.

As far as I am concerned self regulation by the Industry does not work and this is backed up by international research. "The range and sophistication of marketing influences are not adequately addressed by Industry codes of Regulation"²⁸. Let me give one example of a specific case from a recent television ad. The beautifully and no doubt expensively made Guinness ad shown on television over the past few months flouts a number of the self regulatory rules in my opinion. The ad features a young man who runs all across the country, jumps off the Cliffs of Moher (?) and then swims to New York to clear up a row with his brother. (What a man!). In doing so the ad appears to betray a number of codes; "In particular advertisements should not associate the consumption of alcohol with operating machinery, driving, any activity relating to water or heights". Another code states that "it shall not claim that alcohol has therapeutic qualities or that it is a stimulant, a sedative or a means of resolving personal conflicts"²⁹. In addition however, the ad is insensitive to the number of people and their families who have died by accident or intent off those cliffs and others. There are numerous other ads that seem to flout the rule that alcohol must not be portrayed as being essential for sports or social success or that links alcohol to "sexual attraction or physical prowess"³⁰. Sometimes I think the Drinks Industry put these ads out in a cynical fashion, knowing that by the time the complaints are processed they will have already done the trick for them.

Alcohol marketing is a global industry. I could not help but note, in preparation, for this talk, a piece in one of the Sunday papers that Guinness had a 'Viagra' effect in Africa³¹. I wonder where such rumours come from. The truth of course is that alcohol, far from having a 'Viagra' effect, can cause physical and psychological impotence for some people with heavy intake. Partners/Spouses of people who are dependent on alcohol relate horrific stories around sexual behaviour/performance when their partners are drunk.

If the political will is not there for a total ban on advertising, then we should follow the way France has handled this issue under their 'Loi Evin'³². Under this rule advertising that targets young people is prohibited and there are severe penalties for those who flout this law. If the offence is repeated for example, sales of the product can be suspended for up to five years. In addition all advertising on television and in cinema of alcohol and sponsorship of sports is banned. Furthermore all advertisements are required to carry a message to the effect that overuse of alcohol is dangerous to health.

Once every week on TV 3's 'Ireland AM' there is a wine tasting session in the early morning breakfast show. Under this aspect of the 'Loi Evin' they would at the very least be required to issue a Health warning with such an item.

I have to say something about the counter-advertising too. There have been attempts as noted to issue public health messages through ads. It is hard to judge how successful these are though there is some evidence from the States that they help to lower consumption. "From a public health perspective, counter advertising has intuitive appeal, and may be a more realistic political option than seeking a ban on alcohol advertising --- (and) --- the recent US tobacco experience suggests that a hard hitting counter-advertising program can be effective as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy"³³. I am a little cynical, to say the least of the counter-advertising measures by

the Drinks Industry itself, as sometimes I feel it is actually only advertising their products. They seldom if ever, indicate what constitutes 'sensible' or 'moderate' drinking. Such counter-advertising should only be allowed if they are commissioned by government bodies to ensure independence in my opinion.

The media also needs to be more aware of the Drinks Industry's sophisticated attempts to distance themselves from the adverse aspects of products. There is clearly concern amongst the Industry about the harm caused by alcohol and worries too, I'm sure, about possible law suits to come. Reports already indicate that 'twelve alcoholics' are set to sue drink manufacturers in the States.³⁴ There are other suits pending too. One of these law suits for example alleges that "alcohol companies seek to win the loyalty of legal age adults by targeting them as teenagers first"³⁵. In most of the developed countries of the World the Industry has set up agencies for Social responsibility around alcohol. In Ireland this was recently launched as 'Meas' (Irish for 'respect') and standing for 'Mature Enjoyment of Alcohol in Society'. My colleague, Dr. Joe Barry, in a lecture described it as standing for; Minimising Effective Action by the State³⁶! They produced a costly leaflet called "Alcohol a Guide for Parents" which was severely criticised by Health professionals³⁷. The ICGP for example, declined to circulate it to members. It was criticised for being selective with the facts and neglecting to mention binge drinking amongst other serious criticisms. Indeed a lady ringing in on a debate about it to a radio show described it as a case of, "The fox looking after the chickens"³⁸.

At the political level, the minister for Health and Children, Mr, Micheál Martin T.D. and the Minister for Justice, Mr. Michael McDowell deserve credit for trying to help with the alcohol related problems in society. Mr. Martin's tobacco ban in work places, to be introduced shortly, has certainly created great media interest. It will be very interesting to see what difference it will make to drink patterns. At a meeting of the Vintners Federation of Ireland one of the delegates is alleged to have said "We'll see who runs the country" in relation to this issue³⁹. Let us hope the answer is the Government for democracy's sake! To be fair I personally have not encountered resistance from individual Publicans or indeed from off sales outlet owners in relation to public health issues. In fact several of them, have privately commented on the needs for reform and their concerns with the binge drinking culture for their own children.

Alcohol in the Media: How Clear is Your Conscience?

Our own President, Mary McAleese, lamented the Irish weakness for alcohol at a conference in the US last year and provoked criticism for reinforcing a stereotype. I thought she was great to raise the issue.

I believe that the Irish media has done a good job too particularly over the last couple of years in highlighting our national alcohol problem. The two main 'Prime Time' programmes on Alcohol in the last two - three years have done more good than most in pinpointing the problem and the absence of clear solutions to date⁴⁰. These programmes also focussed attention on the public disorder and health and safety issues. The latest programme presented frightening images. The image of the young girl tottering drunk on the edge of the traffic and death was chillingly unforgettable.

Many articles in the Press and magazines and radio programmes have also been to the forefront of agenda setting. After all, the most important role for Journalists, in my opinion, is to set the agenda for the debate of such important issue in society. Their record in this regard is impressive. Some have stopped specific initiatives such as the entrance fee and no limit alcohol consumption policy of a pub in South Dublin last year⁴¹.

According to many commentators internationally the media's tendency in relation to alcohol is to be simplistic, sensational and dramatic⁴². Their role should be governed by the journalistic codes of conduct but in my opinion again should focus on 'Agenda setting' and investigative aspects as well as the individual stories. They should be informed of the public health dimension and also point out any absences in resources to combat the problem. The media should also establish the credibility and bona fides of commentators. Sometimes the fact that articles are published by people employed by, or who have research that has been funded by the Drinks Industry, is not flagged. They should have a watching brief too on content of radio and television programmes and articles. A very interesting piece was done in another Sunday paper recently which highlighted the alcohol content of the 'Soap operas' on television⁴³. 'Fair City', for example, on RTE, had 14 scenes involving alcohol over a two hour period. Finally, a close eye should be kept on web sites on the Internet, which appear to have no regulations at all.

In preparation for this paper I spoke to numerous journalists, presenters and other media personnel and asked them if they ever came across unprofessional or biased reporting around alcohol or indeed if they had their 'copies' amended or altered by editors, and I did not come across one single case.

Some of those I spoke to talked of the dangers of alcohol abuse for journalists themselves and acknowledged that the Drinks Industry does provide 'Freebies' such as the occasional trip or alcohol at Christmas but said that such generosity did not influence their writings in any way.

Is it possible that there are editorial conspiracies at higher level that might influence articles, for example, on the benefits of alcohol or that revenue from marketing might influence editorial content in the same way? Well the answer is yes but again I found no evidence or indeed any hint of such problems. In fact all the media people I spoke to said that if 'outside' pressure was exerted they would get the opposite effect.

There is certainly a role for the media in covering more alcohol free activities and one journalist told me that he would like to see the printed media promoting 'personalities' who drink moderately or those who abstain, more regularly.

Conclusions; Alcohol in the Media; How Clear is Your Conscience?

This paper has highlighted the issue around alcohol and the media. To this writer the vast majority of journalists are people of high integrity. In recent years they have set the agenda regarding the dangers of alcohol abuse and the frightening statistics around alcohol, especially concerning young people. They have also taken on those who have vested interests and challenged their views. They need to be ever vigilant around the sophisticated methods used by the marketing people that promote alcohol and highlight bad practice as well as checking sources carefully. Above all, the media should focus not only on individual stories but also on policy issues. As has often been said; "too much of the action in the alcohol arena is conducted behind the scenes and subjected to political considerations or vested interests", the role of the media as in other areas is to uncover these hidden agenda⁴⁴. As a nation we need to reduce our alcohol intake. We should also all work together to reduce binge drinking and its consequences within our society. Journalists can make a significant contribution to such a team approach.

End

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