

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Tobacco and alcohol use among medical students: a preliminary survey of final year medical students at University College, Galway.

Sir, —

Several surveys have been conducted on alcohol and tobacco use by young people in Dublin and Cork in recent years (1,2,3) but, to date, no survey has been made of alcohol and tobacco use by third level students in Galway. For this reason, and as part of a general survey of the educational and social characteristics of final year medical students at University College, Galway, during the academic year 1990-1991 (4), an assessment was made of the extent of alcohol and tobacco consumption. Students in the final year of their medical course were selected because they had been exposed to both theoretical and practical courses in which the effects of tobacco and alcohol on general health had been demonstrated. The results of such a survey may therefore give some indication of the success, or failure of health education and formal medical education in changing the life-style of young people.

The final year medical class consisted of 63 students. All students were requested to complete a questionnaire of 36 items that covered such general areas as performance at second and third level education, general aspects of career choice, details of family background; the results of this aspect of the survey will be published elsewhere (4). Two additional questions were added to the questionnaire concerning the use of alcohol and tobacco. Students were asked if they drank or smoked and, if so, how much, how frequently and when did they commence the habit?

The questionnaire was designed for students who had been through the Irish post-primary educational system. Only 4 students of the 63 on the course were ineligible to participate in the study. Of the 59 participants (28 male: 26 female), 54 students completed all or part of the questionnaire.

With regard to alcohol use, 79% of the male students and 73% of the female students drank alcohol, and the remainder were abstainers. Only two students failed to answer this question (4%). The units consumed per week for the male students was 12.55 +/- 8.04, while for the female students, the quantity was 5.40 +/- 5.84 units (mean +/- s.d.). Approximately 70% (N=17) of the male students and 62% (N=16) of the female students generally only drank alcohol at week-ends, while 7% (N=2) of males and 4% (N=1) females also drank during the week.

Regarding smoking habits, 75% (N=21) and 85% (N=22) of the male and female students respectively did not smoke. Of those students who smoked, 11% (N=3) of the males and 7% (N=2) of the females smoked less than 13 cigarettes a day. Some 14% (N=4) of the males and 8% (N=2) of the females who smoked consumed 14-25 cigarettes a day. Of the students who did smoke, more than half used low-tar cigarettes.

The students were also asked when they started smoking. Approximately half started smoking while still in secondary school, while the remainder started at university; there appears to be little difference in the pattern between the male and female students. The results of this part of the survey show that less than 20% of the final year medical students smoked and that the majority were moderate smokers of low-tar cigarettes. None smoked pipes or cigars.

The results of this preliminary survey of final year medical students at a provincial Irish University suggest that the use of tobacco is relatively low, and generally reflects the trends throughout Europe in which there is a steady decline in the use of tobacco particularly among those in professional occupations. Alcohol consumption is also moderate among medical students, with less than 10% of students consuming more than the recommended upper limit of 21 units per week. In addition to medical students having a greater awareness of the potential dangers of tobacco use and heavy alcohol consumption, pre-

sumably such factors as a limited income and an environment that is not conducive to smoking and drinking also play an important part in limiting the use of these drugs by medical students.

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References

1. Herity BA, Horgan JM, Bourke GJ, Wilson-Davis K. Tobacco, alcohol and other drug use among medical students. *J Ir Med Assoc* (currently *Ir Med J*) 1977; 70: 532-539.
2. Morgan M, Grube J. Drug use in Irish schools: a comparison with other countries. *Oideas* 1989; 34: 21-30.
3. Godfrey RP. Smoking and alcohol drinking survey. Report by the Student Health Service, University College, Cork 1991.
4. Morrissey M, Leonard BE. A survey of final year medical students at University College Galway: educational backgrounds and career choice. 1992 (submitted).

COVER PICTURE:

Wooden Harp — “Brían Bora Harp”

15th or 16th century A.D. Height: 86cm. Trinity College Dublin (1).

The association of the harp with Brian Boru, high king of Ireland who died in 1014 A.D. is no longer tenable, but may derive from an early 13th century Irish poem which tells of a visit to Scotland to regain a harp of the O'Brien family. Ireland, particularly the north, and western Scotland were part of the same cultural province in the later Middle Ages. Scottish mercenaries fought in the armies of Irish chieftains and many Irish craftsmen, including some masons worked in Scotland. Amid conflicting accounts of the harp's early history, it is not possible to say for certain whether it is of Irish or Scottish workmanship.

The harp is triangular, consisting of a soundbox of willow with later repairs in oak, a forepillar, and a curved neck. Its shape and size are remarkably similar to the “Queen Mary's Harp” in Edinburgh. The forepillar is decorated with a two-headed slug-like reptile, a hallmark of the medieval Irish and Scottish harp. Roundels with animals in combat occur at the upper and lower ends of the forepillar sides, connected by intertwined leafy vines resembling a style of ornament of west Scottish stone carving centred on Iona.

The Irish and Scottish medieval harp is first represented in an 11th century gabled shrine. Earlier instruments represented in sculpture and metalwork are not true harps but lyres. The medieval Irish harp had metal strings which were plucked with long fingernails. It was held on the left shoulder, and the left hand reached across the sound box to cover the upper register of notes, while the right hand covered the bass.

Harpists, like poets were held in high regard in native Irish society. One Irish harpist even had a tomb, dated to the early 16th century, erected in his memory at Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny, where he is shown alongside his wife, with a small harp by his side. Another tomb in Scotland of around 1500 A.D. shows a harp with geometric ornament on the soundbox very similar to that on the Brian Boru harp.

1. Treasures of Ireland. Irish art 3000 B.C. — 1500 A.D. Michael Ryan, editor. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1983.

Thanks to **Eli Lilly** for supporting the front cover.