Heavy drinking by young British women gives cause for concern

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EDITOR—During October and November 2000 a survey of the drinking patterns of British adults aged 18 and over was carried out. Subjects were selected at 267 geographically representative sampling points in England, Scotland, and Wales. Respondents were selected by an interlocking quota to be representative of the general population in terms of age and sex. In addition, a parallel quota of socioeconomic status was imposed. A standardised schedule was used when respondents were interviewed. Sensitive questions were explored with a computer assisted personal interview. Information was elicited from 2027 people, of whom 1052 were women.

As expected,¹ there were considerable differences between the sexes in patterns of self reported alcohol consumption. A total of 91% of men (n=887) and 85% of women (n=890) reported that they sometimes consumed beverage alcohol; 80% of the male drinkers (n=707) and 65% of the female drinkers (n=582) had consumed some alcohol in the previous week.

A surprising difference emerged when the past week's alcohol consumption of women was compared with that of men (table). Among men, those most likely to report that they had been drinking at high risk levels (≥51 units) were aged 35-54. In contrast, by far the highest proportion of women who were high risk drinkers (consuming ≥35 units a week) was among those aged only 18-24. (A unit is defined as 1 cl, or 7.9 g absolute alcohol.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55-64</th>
<th>65-74</th>
<th>≥75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6 (5)</td>
<td>10 (5)</td>
<td>13 (6)</td>
<td>10 (6)</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 (8)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hibell et al recently reported that young people in the United Kingdom are particularly likely to drink heavily.² Our study suggests that different trends may be developing in the drinking careers of women and men. If this is so the number of younger women developing problems related to alcohol is likely to increase. Women are less likely to attend treatment agencies concerned with alcohol problems. Thus staff working in the types of agencies that young women attend need to be trained in early identification of such problems. These agencies include well woman and antenatal clinics.
Footnotes

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References

1. 1. Plant ML


   *The 1999 ESPAD report: alcohol and other drug use among students in 30 European countries. Stockholm: Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs, 2001*