

Understanding the past to shape the future;
where WHO language came from and if we can do
anything about it

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WHO and alcohol

- 1983: Resolution WHA36.12 Alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems: development of national policies and programmes
 - Last governing bodies resolution on (only) alcohol for 18 years
- 2004: Health promotion resolution asks for report on alcohol use
- 2005: Resolution WHA58.26 Public-health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol,
- 2008: Resolution: WHA60 Strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol
- 2010: Global Strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol
- 2022: Action plan to implement the strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol

Agreed language

- Certain terms, once negotiated, adopted and used in governing documents, tend to be reused based on a perceived consensus about their acceptability
- Don't want to reopen difficult negotiations and risk derailing the process

Harmful use of alcohol

- World Health Report 2002
 - DG Foreword: “excessive alcohol consumption”
 - Alcohol is part of the “Risk transition” marketed globally by multinational companies
 - Alcohol is frequently mentioned as a risk factor (136 finds) often in the context of “tobacco and alcohol” as risk factors or “excessive alcohol use”

2004

- WHO Executive Board (EB)
 - EB113/7 Health promotion and healthy lifestyles Report by the Secretariat
 - “Alcohol consumption raises complex issues.”
 - Mr GUNNARSSON (Iceland) referred to “harmful use of alcohol”
 - The introduction of a paragraph on alcohol in the resolution proposal was a Nordic initiative, coming out of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Negotiations there used the term “harmful use”
 - EB113.R2 Resolution: Health promotion and healthy lifestyles
 - “Noting that The world health report 2002 addresses major risks to global health, and highlights the role of behavioural factors, notably unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco consumption and the harmful use of alcohol as key risk factors for noncommunicable diseases which constitute a rapidly growing burden”
 - DG is requested “to report on progress made in the promotion of healthy lifestyles to the Executive Board at its 115th session and to the Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly, including a report on the Organization’s future work on alcohol consumption.”
- World Health Assembly
 - Confirms the resolution

2005 WHO Executive Board (EB)

- Agenda 4.12: Public health problems caused by alcohol
- Report EB115/37 Public health problems caused by alcohol. Ends with a recommendation to note the report
- draft resolution on public health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol proposed by the Nordic countries altogether 49 co-sponsors
- D Gunnarsson (Island): “Even the title of the resolution had proved controversial: some had favoured the formulation “caused by use of alcohol”, while others would have preferred “caused by abuse of alcohol”.
- Resolution: EB115.R5 Public health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol adopted after long negotiations

2005 World Health Assembly

- Report from the secretariat, A58/18, Public health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol
 - From the EB to WHO the WHO Secretariat had changed the name of the report
 - However, not stringent – one sub-heading:
STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE ALCOHOL-RELATED BURDEN
- WHA58.26 Public-health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol was adopted after long negotiations between those who wanted to strengthen the proposed text and those who wanted to weaken it.
- From this onwards “harmful use of alcohol” has been considered agreed language

Interpretation

- Already in the resolution an interpretation was included, mostly to accommodate Muslim countries:
 - “Taking due consideration of the religious and cultural sensitivities of a considerable number of Member States with regard to consumption of alcohol, and emphasizing that use of the word “harmful” in this resolution refers only to public-health effects of alcohol consumption, without prejudice to religious beliefs and cultural norms in any way,”
- Expert Committee:
 - The Committee regards “alcohol-related harm” and “problems related to alcohol consumption” as equivalent terms, [...] Related to one of these terms is “harmful use of alcohol”, a category in the ICD-10 classification [...] refers to a condition in which physical or psychological harm has occurred to the individual as a result of his or her drinking. “Harmful use” in this sense is included in alcohol related harms or problems.

Interpretation

- Global strategy

1. The harmful use of alcohol² has a serious effect on public health and is considered to be one of the main risk factors for poor health globally. In the context of this draft strategy, the concept of the harmful use of alcohol.³ is broad and encompasses the drinking that causes detrimental health and social consequences for the drinker, the people around the drinker and society at large, as well as the patterns of drinking that are associated with increased risk of adverse health outcomes. The harmful use of alcohol compromises both individual and social development. It can ruin the lives of individuals, devastate families, and damage the fabric of communities.

Footnote 3: The word “harmful” in this strategy refers only to public-health effects of alcohol consumption, without prejudice to religious beliefs and cultural norms in any way.

Changes in the future?

- Two different opinions:
 - It is easier to explain the concept rather than change the language that was a result of a consensus that was not easy to achieve.
 - The harmful use language is incorrect as there is no safe level of alcohol use for health (cancer, CVD).

Other language in the process

- About the alcohol industry's role: 'in their roles as producers, distributors and marketers' (about alcohol industry),
 - This expression came from the Expert Committee report (2007)
- 'economic operators',
 - Term preferred by some countries in the 2008 discussions of the resolution calling for the development of the global strategy
- 'consult with'
 - Result of negotiations and manoeuvring in the final stage of the adoption of the 2008-resolution
- But that's another story...
 - More investigations is needed.