

Alcohol, the gateway drug?

Experts here are not at all surprised by results of British study, which show that this socially-acceptable drug can be the most destructive

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IF alcohol is more lethal than heroin, as a recent study contends, should we be paying closer attention to the misuse of alcohol in Singapore?

In the controversial study — published last month in *The Lancet*, a respected medical journal — British researchers ranked various substances based on how destructive they are to the individual who takes them, as well as to society as a whole.

Heroin, crack cocaine and methamphetamine, or crystal meth, were the most lethal to individuals. In terms of their wider social effects, alcohol, heroin and crack cocaine were the deadliest. But overall, alcohol outranked all other substances, followed by heroin and crack cocaine.

For some medical experts in Singapore, the study was a reminder of how legal drugs can wreak harm.

“It is true that alcohol and legal drugs are an increasing problem; and I've seen more patients die from complications of their alcoholism than I have from (illegal) drugs,” said Dr Munidasa Winslow from the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

“The study emphasises something we already knew — that the legal drugs like tobacco and alcohol actually have a much more severe effect on people's health because of the sheer number who engage in those addictions. The public probably has to have a greater awareness of the dangers of smoking and alcohol, which our Health Promotion Board does try to do,” said Dr Winslow.

Said Dr Thomas Lee, who heads the Addiction Medicine Department, Institute of Mental Health (IMH): “The findings are not surprising to us, as we already know the harmful effects of alcohol to the individual and society ... Due to the ubiquitous availability of alcohol, people have the tendency to think that it is okay to drink. In fact, alcohol is a psychotropic drug which, like many other medications or substances of abuse, acts on the brain. It depresses or ‘shuts down’ the brain functions, hence those classical signs of intoxication.

“Alcohol also causes harm to many organs in the body, especially the liver. It can lead to compulsive drinking, leading to further harm. Harm to families, significant others, occupational and academic functions are almost always present. However, most people are not even aware of these.”

“Personally, I believe that extra effort and attention must be put into educating

children (about alcohol-related harm) ... just like sex education,” added Dr Lee, who is also a consultant at IMH’s National Addictions Management Service (NAMS).

While a cautionary note may be sounded regarding excessive alcohol use, there is probably no need for alarm bells.

Alcohol-related harm isn’t generally regarded as being a big social problem in Singapore.

Incidents of drink driving have decreased in recent years — Singapore Police Force statistics show that, while 4,010 people were arrested for drink driving in 2007, 2,985 were arrested last year.

Alcohol addiction cases at NAMS, for instance, have remained stable. For the past three years, the clinic, which serves about 2,000 patients a year, has seen about half of its patients being treated for drug addictions, followed by nearly 30 per cent for alcohol addictions. In FY2009, cases of gambling addiction accounted for 17 per cent.

“Young alcoholics are mostly binge drinkers ... They prefer to drink as a group. Different kinds of alcohol would be consumed — beer, wine, hard liquor, and so on.

“Older drinkers typically drink alone or in smaller groups ... Some of them get ‘hooked’ onto alcohol and develop alcohol dependence, which is compulsive drinking. When they eventually run out of money, they turn to cheap alcohol like Chinese rice wine, which has a high alcohol content,” said Dr Lee.

Furthermore, some experts disagree with the study published in *The Lancet*.

“The 20 drugs were scored and weighted singly. In other words, polysubstance use, which is very prevalent among drug users, is not addressed in this study. The combined effects of two or more drugs can be more harmful and destructive than, for example, alcohol alone,” said Dr Lee, adding that there was an apparent arbitrariness in how the substances were evaluated.

Others take issue with the fact that the vast numbers of responsible consumers of alcohol are not taken into account.

“Alcohol consumption is much more prevalent than the use of drugs ... the prevalence of alcohol consumption will make these numbers seem bigger ... There is also a failure to differentiate how people are drinking ... it didn’t differentiate between alcohol consumption and alcohol abuse,” said Dr Marjana Martinic, senior vice-president at the non-profit International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP).

Dr Martinic, who has published extensively on alcohol policy, said that while

illicit drugs cause only harm, moderate drinking has health and other benefits.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at think-tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), noted that “the research published in The Lancet shows that alcohol has the most societal ill primarily because it is so easily available with few restrictions imposed on it”.

ALCOHOL AND DRUG ADDICTS

According to former addict Manger Ong, who now works at Breakthrough Missions, a Christian halfway house, alcohol played a small role during his addiction to drugs.

“Before, I would take alcohol with pills, with marijuana, from afternoon till night. Mix with drugs, you will feel high,” said Mr Ong, 43, who paints and sells oil paintings. He added that he soon abandoned alcohol when he became addicted to heroin. He has been drug-free for about eight years.

“Dual addiction to drugs and alcohol is fairly common,” said Dr Lee.

Heroin and methamphetamine are the top two drugs used in Singapore, according to figures from the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB). All former and recovering addicts interviewed by Weekend Today described a history of repeated stints in prison on drug-related or other charges, as well as a record of abusing a variety of drugs from their teens onwards.

For some, who have abused both alcohol and drugs, the widespread availability of alcohol gave impetus to a raging alcoholism.

“You can buy alcohol anywhere, nobody will stop us from buying it, it’s very easy to get, whereas for drugs, if you get caught, you go to prison,” said Mr Tamil Selvan, a recovering alcoholic at The Helping Hand, another Christian halfway house. Mr Selvan, 35, said he stopped using drugs a few years ago and turned to alcohol; he said he used to drink six bottles of Chinese rice wine a day — a bottle usually costs under \$2.

Heroin and methamphetamine users accounted for 84 per cent of all drug abusers arrested in the first half this year, according to CNB figures.

“New abusers arrested for the consumption of drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drug Act will generally be eligible for treatment and rehabilitation in a Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC) without the stigmatisation of a criminal record. However, recalcitrant offenders may be charged in court for drug consumption and face imprisonment and possibly caning,” a CNB spokesperson said. DRCs are managed by Singapore Prison Service.

Mr Vincent David, a recovering alcoholic at The Helping Hand, said: “In my younger days, I was hooked on drugs. When there were no drugs, I would go

back to drinking; I substitute.”

“From young, we’re used to getting high, one thing stop, go to another thing,” said Mr Selvan.

For those battling dual addictions — including recovering drug users who might relapse in their drug addiction, after turning to alcohol — Ms Valerie Wong, a counselor at Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, had this advice: “Recovering from dual addictions is difficult, but it can be accomplished.

“For those with dual addictions, he or she may have to work and be more mindful of the triggers for alcohol first, before working on their drug problems.”