

Out of Hours Exhibition

TIME LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!

'This Bewitching Poison'

Alcohol and the Royal College of Physicians

First Floor Gallery and Treasures Room

Royal College of Physicians, London

13 January–27 June 2014

Monday–Friday 9am–5pm, free entry

'Alcohol is the anaesthesia by which we endure the operation of life.'

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950).

On the day we visited the Royal College of Physician's exhibition on alcohol the first motorway pub opened in the UK (in Buckinghamshire), which must surely go down as a triumph of commerce over public health.

There is a reason why humans like to drink. 'Ardent spirit', 'fire water', 'booze', 'grog', 'liquor', call it what you will, it loosens inhibitions, raises cheer, and contributes

to a fun time. Historically, hard drinking was commonplace, easing hard labour (and lives), and considered normal. As ever, moderation is the key and we are now told there is no such thing as a safe level of alcohol consumption. A recent Alcohol Health Alliance report claims that seven types of cancer, including breast cancer, are associated with alcohol.

It was interesting to view this thoughtful exhibition and ask whether we have learned much from the days when government attempted to control gin consumption using taxation, such was its prevalence. The RCP petitioned the government in 1726 about:

'... the fatal effects of the frequent use of several sorts of distilled spirituous liquors on great numbers of both sexes.'

From the early 18th century, beer's main rival was gin. The 1830 Beer House Act

liberalised the laws concerning the brewing and selling of beer, and was designed to acustom people to what was seen as a more nutritious and less dangerous drink, leading to the existence of many more pubs.¹

Beer became much stronger in the 19th century when brewing was industrialised leading to fears of drunkenness among working men. During the 19th century the consumption of alcohol among such men was derided and fought against by the temperance movement.

Perhaps the question *isn't*

why are we not doing more to prevent people from drinking too much but why is it that people feel the need to drink to excess in the first place?

Interestingly, *The Guardian* recently reported that *'the most significant increases in alcohol-related harm are actually in older age groups, with people aged 65 and over also reporting the highest rates of drinking on 5 or more days a week'*:²

On display at the exhibition are paintings, prints, rare books and intriguing artefacts with loans from the Museum of London, the Wellcome Library, the Cartoon Museum, and others.

Hogarth's famous print *Gin Lane* is present alongside its partner *Beer Street*, the illustrations underlined the contemporary differences drawn between spirits (gin) and beer, which was seen as healthy and bolstering. Also on display is the painting *The Last Drop* (pictured).

I especially enjoyed viewing an antimony cup (c1600–1637). The patient was instructed to:

'Fill it with white wine and put a clove or two in it, then let it stand all night. Next morning drink the wine which will work first by a vomit, and then by stools also.'

But the treatment was lethal. If the wine used was too acidic, too much antimony was oxidised in the resulting draft. Three people reputedly died after drinking from the cup on display.

Moira Davies

Assistant Editor, *BJGP*.

E-mail: mdavies@rcgp.org.uk

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2. Siddique H. Alcohol-related deaths among the elderly reach highest ever level. *The Guardian* 2014; 19 Feb: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/19/alcohol-deaths-elderly-rise-ons> (accessed 3 Mar 2014).

