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**An absence of alcohol policy**

SIR,—In a short space I cannot comment on all the imputations in your leading article (11 December, p 1680) on my speech to the BMA symposium on 30 November. But it is completely false to suggest that the government's strategy is "to turn alcohol problems from a public health issue into a problem for individuals." This ignores, for example, the Transport Act 1981—the first government action to tighten up the law on drunk driving since 1967; this government's stated policies and record on taxation and excise duties; its standstill in the face of pressures to relax the licensing laws; its encouragement to the Health Education Council; and its direct efforts to increase awareness of the problem of alcohol misuse by all who can play a part in preventing it.

I did not say that I am against the idea of a forum. In *Drinking Sensibly*<sup>1</sup> we said that we would welcome views on such a body, independent of government, in which the many groups interested in alcohol could discuss common ground in preventing misuse. What I said at the symposium was that it would be sensible first to identify topics which could usefully be discussed and then to consider how this could be done.

I fail to understand your reference to economies in Whitehall not being allowed to postpone the creation of the new voluntary organisation. Do you not realise that it is the government which has suggested that this body should be set up and which has offered to grant aid its main functions as soon as it is established?

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Health and Social Security. *Prevention and health: drinking sensibly*. London: HMSO, 1981.

SIR,—A recent leading article (11 December, p 1680) reported Mr G Finsberg's speech at a BMA conference and asserted that the Department of Health and Social Security and the government had no policy for preventing

alcoholism. Your assistant editor, Dr Richard Smith, who at the conference identified himself as your journal's representative and whose recent articles provided such a brilliant account of the alcoholism scene, would probably not dispute authorship. He can have meant only that the government was not pursuing the policies that he advocates. These are too simplistic, and by oversimplifying he has fallen into error. The prevention of alcoholism is a complex matter; a variety of issues and interests has to be borne in mind. Pressures from the drink trade and from the Treasury should be set aside, but the liberty of the subject, free will, and personal responsibility must be seriously taken into account. The Advisory Committee on Alcoholism, which I chaired, certainly did not pander to commercial interest and was motivated not by the totality of the interests of the government but only by health considerations. The minister's speech and DHSS policy fairly reflected the advice we gave. Your readers are entitled to a more balanced consideration of the reasons for these policies.

Dr Smith made two charges at the meeting. He blamed the government for not publishing the review of the Central Policy Review Staff on the subject; I take no stand on whether they should, as they did, have followed custom in this matter, nor whether a stolen copy should have been published piratically overseas.<sup>1</sup> Suppression of the report, however, has made it appear as though the government did not wish the public to know how large the problem of alcoholism is and how much it is increasing. But the DHSS has never concealed this. Its preventive recommendations in *Drinking Sensibly*<sup>2</sup> say as much as do the published reports of the Advisory Committee on Alcoholism. He further attacked the minister for not accepting the relation, now abundantly shown, between changes in national consumption figures and corresponding changes in any index of alcohol related harm—driving offences, hospital admissions for alcoholism, deaths related to alcohol—that one cares to measure. Dr Smith was right. Mr Finsberg was wrong to say that the question remains

open. Across the board, if one excepts the meretricious and discredited Home Office paper,<sup>3</sup> this relation is accepted by scientists and by responsible bodies studying alcoholism all over the world. Certainly the advice he was given by the Advisory Committee on Alcoholism spoke in that sense.

It by no means follows, however, although Dr Smith claims it does, that the government must take steps to reduce national consumption. The situation is not like the matter of poisoning by lead in the atmosphere. There, the individual can take no personal steps to protect himself and must rely on government action. But for the government to intervene to reduce alcohol consumption would reduce the freedom of the majority of people, who have no alcohol problems, to purchase and enjoy their drinks. The only effective measures open to it are to raise the price by taxation and to limit the opportunity to drink by tightening the licensing laws. The problem of how much the freedom of the majority should be circumscribed for the sake of the health of the minority, however numerous, is much more subtle and complex than Dr Smith seemed to think. Certainly Mr Finsberg was seized of that complexity and of its being compounded by the fact that the affected minority have it in their own determination whether to drink excessively or not. The individual's responsibility in this respect and his liberty to exercise that responsibility cannot, whatever Dr Smith thinks, be bilked.

The minister made clear the intention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to regulate the duty on alcohol so that it shall become no cheaper in terms of average wage earnings. To have secured that undertaking, which can have no other reason behind it than the protection of the public health, represents a considerable behind the scenes success for the DHSS. This was the policy of containment urged by the Advisory Committee on Alcoholism in its prevention report.<sup>4</sup> After considering the problem largely it decided, notwithstanding the knowledge that price and licensing controls could reduce the size of the problem, against urging higher taxation or