

STRATFORD GUILD 14TH SEPTEMBER 2022 – “ALCOHOL CONSIDERED”

David Balston introduced Dr Charles Rees, the first Guild speaker of the Carolean era.

Dr Rees introduced himself as a GP, senior partner in a career in which he had trained thirty doctors in general practice; he had been GP trainer for East Dorset. Since then he has done ‘a few locums etc’ but for the last two years he has properly retired except for writing a book.

The speaker’s theme is a sceptical view of alcohol within a doctor’s medical experience. He used this to present a fluid and amusing talk.

He began by quoting Dame Sally Davis (as Chief Medical Officer). She states that ‘there is no safe limit for alcohol.’ Dr Rees says this is nonsense, for one thing this statement is enough to disturb the feelings of everybody without exception which it clearly does not, judging by the huge size of the industry that it generates and has done for years. And how would you classify cyanide, mercury, strychnine or even crack cocaine? Their safe limits are clearly different from that of alcohol. Can all the world be wrong apart from Dame Sally?

So there must be a compromise. This leads to some often quoted statistics: 1 – 50% of road traffic accidents are related to alcohol. 2 - 40% of hospital admissions are alcohol related. Where do these figures come from? He does not know, he is still trying to find out. Statistically this could be related to the French Paradox, namely why do the French have a low incidence of Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) despite having a high saturated fat diet (eg Brie). An easy explanation is their notoriously weak (?) Public Health reporting system. It could well apply to wine.

So how many drinks (expressed as units) a day increase longevity? There is a statistical study putting the optimum at 5-6. This is shown by a graph in the form of a ‘J’. So the answer to the question depends on how you look at the graph (and turning it upside down does not help). Also how large is a unit? Convention in England puts a unit as half a pint of beer (notoriously variable) or a single whisky (some would say this is not much more than a dirty glass.) The graph’s shape definitely shows the optimum drinking rate is above zero. (When I was working as a young doctor in East London (1960s) the Evening Standard published a graph showing that the chance of having a road accident while driving home was least after one pint (of beer) than after none, and unchanged after two. At three it was higher. This my earliest experience of Dr Rees’s J curve. I commented on this and received no reply.

Is red wine good for the heart? Yes, or possibly maybe, but not white. Except for the USA, make what you will of that.

Dr Rees says that there is no energy in alcohol because it metabolises into CO₂ and H₂O ‘and nothing else’. Actually I think his chemistry is a bit dodgy here (my turn to be sceptic) because how then could you run a car on alcohol, and you can, especially in the USA. In fact all chemical reactions contain an energy element but it is never put among the chemical symbols.

The liver can safely metabolise 4% alcohol continuously which makes beer (this must be the ‘small beer’ drunk by the Victorians) because it is certainly safer than the water available, say, in the 19th century and before. However some beers are much stronger when expressed as units as an estimate of strength. Monastic records (which were very carefully kept for reasons of domestic economy) are a help when researching this subject. Units vary in size from decade to decade and from place to place (ours are smaller than on the continent, maybe). And pubs are closing all the time – does this raise or lower individual consumption? There is so much fuzzy science, for example the so called 40% alcohol involvement in hospital attendances is actually nearer 5-7%, the larger figure reflecting repeat visits. It is general believed that the abundance of iron present in spinach is in a form unavailable to human digestion. Is this true? No, the belief is due to misplaced punctuation in a single piece of research. Official guidance is that it is safe to drive with a blood alcohol level of 79 mg%. It is not. Don’t try it.

There was an enormous number of questions and comments at the end, but finally the Chairman had to call them to an end to provide him with the chance to express our well deserved appreciation.

Charles Villiers.