

[A measure of paternalism](#) [1]

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Is measuring alcohol units a good thing? That was the question posed by a debate on Saturday at the Battle of Ideas. At first glance, it seems entirely reasonable that we should know the alcohol content of a given drink. But units are quite different: they allow us to compare the amount of alcohol to an ostensibly objective 'daily guideline'.

It very quickly emerged that this 'guideline' is flawed, if not harmful. From a medical perspective, it is almost impossible to predict the effect of alcohol on the average person. After all, we all have different levels of tolerance, are susceptible to different conditions, and are affected by a multitude of other factors too. The truth is all alcohol is unhealthy; and we know it! But by creating this artificial, arbitrary, and ultimately quite useless measure of alcohol consumption, we risk creating a problem. By definition.

Without an objective standard of what is healthy and unhealthy, we tend to conform to cultural norms. Alcohol consumption experiences its ups and downs, with one generation guzzling gin in Georgian proportions, and another religiously enthralled to temperance. Society itself defines this level of socially acceptable drinking. When we exceed it we are seen to have a problem. More importantly, we're brought up to see ourselves as having a problem, and in extreme cases friends and family intervene. It is a process that has been serving humanity well since at least 3000 BC, when Egypt's Pharaohs started mass-producing wine.

Despite agreeing that the measurement was flawed, a panellist at a government health body stood up and said that we nevertheless needed to look beyond the individual's right to drink, and look at society as a whole. He implied that measures needed to be taken to protect people from themselves, as individuals are too stupid or ignorant to know what is good for them. And thus that society is too ill informed to define an acceptable drinking norm. He brought up extreme problem cases, citing studies of alcohol addiction, and its effects on families and friends. Another doctor chipped in by saying the flaws of alcohol units paled in comparison to the need to inform the public of what they are consuming. They all called for greater regulation, restrictions and taxation, to the detriment of all drinkers.

Of course doctors know better than anyone else what the individual can suffer from excessive alcohol consumption, but these statements suggest a more sinister campaign for wider social control rather than individualised help for the particular patient. There is a fundamental difference between providing "information", and providing knowledge. The first is by their own admission deeply biased. Whereas knowledge is already provided not only by individual diagnoses and by society at large, but every Saturday morning by alcohol's very own resident teacher from experience: the hangover.

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