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DOES INEBRIETY CONDUCE

TO

LONGEVITY ?



BY

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PREFACE.

THIS Paper, written in response to a large number of requests, has been reprinted from the "Proceedings" of the Society for the Study of Inebriety, in the hope that it will contribute a little towards the exposure of the absurd (though widely believed) misapplication of certain statistics misrepresented as demonstrating the alleged power of Abstinence to shorten life.

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May, 1889.



DOES INEBRIETY CONDUCE TO LONGEVITY?

FROM different parts of the United Kingdom, and from many countries I have been inundated by pressing requests to "expose the falsity" of such startling statements as the following, copied from one of many similar cards which in various languages, are reported to me to have attained an enormous circulation at the hands of persons interested in the manufacture and sale of intoxicating drinks:—

"TEETOTALISM DANGEROUS TO LIFE.

"The following table, taken from the Committee of the British Medical Association, in connection with their investigation on Disease and Alcohol, appears to place the advocates of the pump in an unenviable position.

AVERAGE AGE AT DEATH.

	YEARS.	DAYS.
A. Total Abstainers	51	80
B. Decidedly Intemperate	52	14
C. Free Drinkers	57	216
D. Careless Drinkers	59	246
E. Habitually Temperate	62	50

From this it will be gathered that even the HABITUAL DRUNKARD has the advantage of the Blue Ribbonist by one year, and the temperate beats him by more than a decade."

The excellent people who have written to me, have nearly all declared their disbelief either that such an enquiry ever took

place, or that such figures were ever issued by any scientific body of medical men; and with one accord they bewail the publication as a "terrible blow to temperance."

My good friends have been as mistakenly incredulous as they have been needlessly afraid. A moment's reflection ought to teach that no returns showing a greater average premature mortality among abstainers than among drunkards under ordinary and equal conditions, can possibly be accurate. Common sense, with very little knowledge and experience, should suffice to prove that there is a vital flaw somewhere in any anti-abstinence application of these eccentric statistics. The misstatement (if designed) is too gross to be explained away; the blunder (if unintentional) is too palpable to avoid detection.

THE FACTS STATED.

It is quite true that such figures were set forth, but it is NOT TRUE:—(1) That they warrant any deduction in favour of the superior longevity of excessive or limited drinkers. (2) That the British Medical Association, or any of its committees or officers, gave utterance to such an absurd and unfounded conclusion.

These are the facts. In the course of enquiry into "the connection of Disease with the Habit of Intemperance," an appeal was made by the Collective Investigation Committee to the 13,000 members of the British Medical Association to fill up returns showing (among other particulars) the age and cause of death of male patients who had died over the age of 25 years, from the counterfoils of each practitioner's death certificate book for the preceding three years. The report was presented by Dr. Isambard Owen at the annual meeting of the Association in Dublin, in 1887, and was published in the *British Medical Journal* June 23rd, 1888.

MODERATE DRINKING.

Dr. Owen, who collated the returns, has again and again publicly repeated the disclaimer EMBODIED IN THE REPORT of the

Investigating Committee, viz. :—“ We have NOT in these returns the means of coming to ANY conclusion as to the relative duration of life of total abstainers and habitually temperate drinkers of alcoholic liquors.”

INTEMPERATE DRINKING.

The Committee in their report state, *inter alia*, that on the whole they may not unfairly claim to have placed upon a basis of fact this conclusion, viz. :—“ That habitual indulgence in alcoholic liquors beyond the most moderate amounts has a DISTINCT TENDENCY TO SHORTEN life, the average shortening being roughly proportional to the degree of indulgence.”

THE REPORT MISREPRESENTED.

It is therefore manifest that a wrong use has been made of the figures given in the committee's report; that there is NO WARRANT for the printed statement that “ the habitual drunkard has the advantage of the Blue Ribbonist by one year, and the Temperate beats him by more than a decade ; ” and that this statement is directly opposed to the terms of the British Medical Association report.

Notwithstanding the explicit language of the report, and authoritative contradictions by the *British Medical Journal*, by other leading medical papers, by Dr. Owen and by other persons with a knowledge of the facts, the misapplication of the figures and the misrepresentation of the committee's report are persistently being promulgated far and wide. It may therefore be useful to enter a little into details.

DEFECTS OF THE ENQUIRY.

This investigation, however serviceable as a guide to future enquiries, was too defective to warrant any dogmatic general conclusions.

One of the chief defects of this report arises from the limited number of medical men who have reported, and the small total of deaths returned. Returns were received from only 178 members (two of whom practice in the Colonies, two in Ireland, and five in Scotland), and the whole number of deaths recorded was but 4,234. These data are much too restricted (being only about one per cent.) to afford a sufficient basis for founding any reliable generalization as to the effects of temperance or intemperance on the total of male deaths at more than 25 years of age, that took place in the kingdom during the three years over which the returns extended.

A still more serious defect is the loose method employed in the collection of the returns, which were simply drawn from the death-certificate counterfoils of the three preceding years. The memory of a busy medical practitioner is too over-burdened to admit of reliance being placed upon recollection of particulars of cases even a few months back. This defect, in my opinion, alone suffices to vitiate the report as a whole. Probably not half a dozen of the reporters had their attention, during the period of observation, directed to the relation of a temperate or intemperate habit of life to the causes of death. I have no doubt that the reporters have all done their best to give as accurate returns as possible; but from my own experience of a previous attempt to secure a similar return on a much smaller scale—for a preceding period of twelve months—I feel confident that the only judicious plan would be to ask reports of deaths for a FUTURE period, extending say from January 1st, 1890, over one, two, or three years. The practitioner could then fill in the particulars (to which his attention would be specially called), of each death, while his remembrance of the circumstances would be fresh and trustworthy.

A third important defect is that of classification of drinkers into (1) the habitually temperate, (2) careless drinkers, (3) free drinkers. The habitually temperate are defined as drinking small amounts, only with meals, and rarely taking spirits except as a medicine. The latter part of this definition did not apply to whisky-drinking countries, so that the Scottish and Irish figures are on a different footing from those of England. The careless drinkers were described as neither "intemperate" nor "free," yet as not confining themselves within a rigid rule, not objecting to spirits occasionally as a beverage, at times drinking

between meals, or even getting drunk occasionally, but not making either practice a habit, and, on the average, not materially exceeding the so-called "physiological quantity" of one and a half ounces of pure alcohol daily. The free drinkers were stated to be men who drink a fair amount, or take their wine freely, habitually exceeding the physiological quantity to a material extent, yet who could not be called drunkards or be considered as having forfeited a reputation for sobriety. The decidedly intemperate were called "drinking men," "hard drinkers," and "drunkards." This distribution will, by those who have devoted close attention to inebriety, be recognised as most indefinite so far as the habitually temperate, careless, and free drinkers are concerned. There is a large proportion of drinkers who are abstemious to a degree in company, but who indulge to excess in secret, their habit of secret and solitary intoxication, or of less pronounced drinking, never being discovered except by accident.

All these and other qualifications must be borne in mind when considering the lessons to be learnt from this enquiry in which, it will be remembered, were included only males dying above 25. Only 2·8 per cent. were abstainers, about 42 per cent. were habitually moderate, 25 per cent. were careless, and 30 per cent. were more or less distinctly intemperate. If this state of matters be true, it is very serious that less than one half of our drinkers should be "habitually moderate."

GREATER LONGEVITY OF THE TEMPERATE VERSUS THE INTEMPERATE.

The average age at death was, of abstainers 51·22 years, of the habitually temperate 62·13 years, of careless drinkers 59·67 years, of free drinkers 57·59 years, and of the decidedly intemperate 52·03 years. This shows a difference of ten years in favour of the habitually temperate as compared with the decidedly intemperate.

EXPLANATION OF THE APPARENT SHORTER LIFE OF THE ABSTINENT.

The most remarkable feature of the table is the apparently shorter duration of life among the abstainers as compared with drinkers of all degrees. The length of life of the nephalists was about 11 years less than the average of the habitually temperate, eight years less than the average of the careless drinkers, about six years less than the average of the free drinkers, and about three-quarters of a year less than the average of the decidedly intemperate.

The explanation of this apparent greater shortness of life among the teetotalers is very simple. The general habit of drinking has come down from remote antiquity, while the abstinence movement is but some 50 years or so old. The great majority of our converts to teetotalism have been young persons, so that the AVERAGE AGE OF LIVING ABSTAINERS MUST FOR SOME TIME TO COME BE MUCH LESS THAN THE AVERAGE AGE OF DRINKERS OF ALL DEGREES. Such is the simple explanation of this latest "Mare's nest of Bacchus."

This explanation is corroborated by two other tables constructed by Dr. Owen and his committee. When deaths UNDER 30 years of age were excluded, the AVERAGE AGE OF THE ABSTAINERS WAS ABOUT FOUR YEARS MORE THAN THAT OF THE DECIDEDLY INTEMPERATE. When all deaths under 40 years were excluded, the average age of the TEETOTALER WAS ONE YEAR GREATER than that of the FREE DRINKERS, and more than 5 YEARS GREATER than that of the INTEMPERATE.

INSURANCE STATISTICS PROVE ABSTINENCE CONDUCTIVE TO LONGEVITY.

A conclusive proof of the superior longevity of abstainers over drinkers who are not drunkards, is afforded by the returns of the United Kingdom Temperance and General Provident Institution. The statistics are spread over 22 years, and embrace only the lives of abstainers and moderate drinkers, drunkards being excluded.

	TEMPERANCE SECTION.		GENERAL SECTION.	
	EXPECTED DEATHS.	ACTUAL DEATHS.	EXPECTED DEATHS.	ACTUAL DEATHS.
1866-70 (5 years) . .	549	411	1008	944
1871-75 " . .	723	511	1268	1330
1876-80 " . .	933	651	1485	1480
1881-85 " . .	1179	835	1670	1530
1886-87 (2 years) . .	553	390	713	700
22 years	3937	2798	6144	5984

These figures show only 71 per cent. mortality of the expectancy, a saving of 29 lives in every 100 among the abstainers, while among the non abstainers there was a mortality of 93 per cent., or a saving of but two lives in every 100.

These tables, supported by similar returns from other insurance offices,* afford the best proof at present attainable of the comparative duration of life among abstainers and non-abstainers. Therefore, by the most practical and crucial test that can be applied, ABSTINENCE is demonstrated to be FAVOURABLE TO LONG LIFE.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE COMMITTEE.

Dr. Owen and the Investigation Committee have done their best with the imperfect material placed at their disposal. Their labours merited far different treatment from the gross misrepresentation to which their returns and their report have been subjected. Taking the report as it stands, the following (among other statements) are plainly set forth in it:— That the returns reported on afford no means of coming to any conclusion, as to the relative duration of life of abstainers and habitually temperate drinkers. That habitual indulgence in alcoholic liquors BEYOND THE MOST MODERATE amounts has a distinct tendency to SHORTEN life, the average shortening being

* The Sceptre Life Association records 1884-8, gave a mortality as regards the number of expected deaths of 79 per cent. in the General Section, and of 56 per cent. in the Temperance Section. In the Whittington Life Assurance Company, since 1844 the death-rate in the Ordinary Section was 16.35 per 1000 per annum, and in the Temperance Section only about one-half or 8.74 per 1000.

roughly proportional to the degree of indulgence. That in the production of cirrhosis and gout, alcoholic excess plays the very marked part which it has long been recognised as doing. That total ABSTINENCE and habitual temperance augment considerably the chance of death from OLD AGE OR NATURAL DECAY. So does true science even witness to the superior healthfulness of abstinence. The more the effects of alcoholic intoxicants are enquired into, the stronger confirmation there will be of the truth of the foundation principle of the great temperance and prohibition movements, that intoxicating narcotics are dangerous articles, noxious to health and life, in all quantities which are followed by any appreciable effect.