

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Health

By email

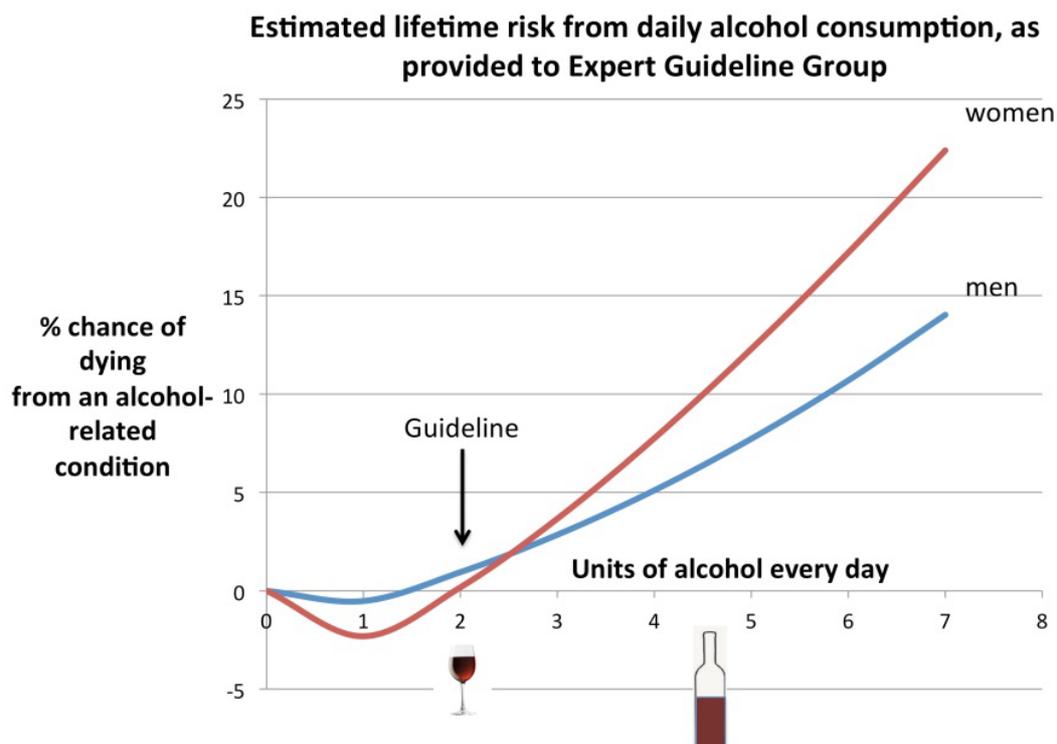
18 January 2016

Dear Secretary of State,

Department of Health communication about alcohol guidelines

We are writing as President and President-Elect of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) on behalf of the RSS. We are concerned that, in their recent communications about alcohol guidelines, the Department of Health did not properly reflect the statistical evidence provided to the Expert Guideline Group, and this could lead to both a loss of reputation and reduced public trust in future health guidance.

The Expert Guideline Group published evidence from the Sheffield modelling exercise that we have summarised in the graphic below.



From this picture we can conclude:

- At one unit a day (half a standard glass of wine), they estimate a very small overall benefit for men and a larger overall benefit for women.
- Each subsequent unit steadily raises the risk.
- The 'low-risk' threshold is at a level where it is estimated that the small lifetime benefit in heart disease and stroke has been overwhelmed by cancer and other harms.
- There is a dramatically increased risk for higher consumption, with women having a steeper gradient than men.

When communicating the draft guidance, the Department appropriately identified 14 units a week as a 'low-risk' level, and correctly avoided the term 'safe' (since this could give the misleading impression that consumption above this level was 'unsafe').

But otherwise the communication from the Department of Health did not appear to reflect the evidence provided to the Expert Group, for example:

- There was consistent downplaying and even denial of benefit, with the Press release saying that "the protective effect of alcohol against heart disease has now been shown not to apply to men", which directly contradicts the estimates published in the Expert Group Report.
- The potential harms from cancer were repeatedly emphasised, even though the modellers concluded these were outweighed by the reduction in strokes and heart disease for low consumption in both men and women.
- No mention was made of the harms of additional consumption, and that these were higher in women.
- Further, the tone of the Department of Health website was very prescriptive, saying men 'should' drink less than 14 units.

We recognise that this is a contested area of science with considerable uncertainties, and the Expert Guideline group based their conclusions on more than the Sheffield analysis. We also acknowledge that the Government has a complex task in communicating complex information to the public. Nevertheless, we believe in the principle clearly articulated in the Expert Group Report itself: "*People have a right to accurate information and clear advice about alcohol and its health risks. There is a responsibility on Government to ensure this information is provided for citizens in an open way, so they can make informed choices*".

In this case it is our view that the communication of the guidelines failed to meet this principle of 'informed choice' and there has been substantial comment in the media along these lines, including considered editorials in the Guardian and the Times. We are concerned that scepticism concerning the guideline process might apply to future pronouncements concerning arguably much greater health risks associated with inactivity, poor diet and obesity that, unlike alcohol consumption, are increasing problems. Once public trust has been lost, it is extremely difficult to win back, and you will have lost a key tool in managing future behavioural change.

We hope that in the final communication of alcohol guidelines, the Department can live up to its claim to providing balanced evidence to those who wish to receive this information, including the public and in particular health practitioners, by for example using infographics such as that above.

We would be happy to meet with you and discuss the communication of statistics-based messages to a varied public.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Peter Diggle'.

Professor Peter Diggle
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Spiegelhalter'.

Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter
President-Elect