



**Expert committees of the WHO played a significant role in the development, dissemination and standardization of concepts and terminology around addiction in relation to drugs, alcohol and tobacco from the 1940s to the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**addiction**  
**WHO**  
**concepts**  
**dependence**

We examined the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) and its expert committees in disseminating concepts around addiction in relation to illicit drugs, alcohol and tobacco from 1949 to 2013. Expert committees had considerable engagement with concepts and terminology and the WHO was important in establishing and shifting the conceptual boundaries between these substances. Three time periods were surveyed: 1949-1963 when intense discussion of concepts and terminology in relation to drugs and alcohol occurred, most notably around the term ‘addiction’, and the substances were discussed as separate issues; 1964-1989 when the concept of ‘dependence’ emerged ushering in the potential for a combined approach to the substances and when discussion of tobacco arose for the first time; and the 1990s onwards, when a more sustained, combined approach to the substances developed and the WHO exercised its constitutional powers to establish the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. We found increasing linkages between the three substances, in particular, a more combined approach to research and treatment, but differences in control. Early involvement with the problems of substance use and earlier discussion of tobacco than has generally been indicated in the existing literature was uncovered. Factors that influenced discussions included: changing scientific knowledge, varying approaches from an increasing number of scientific disciplines, changes in drug use, political-economic concerns and cultural differences. Harmonisation of concepts of addiction at the international level is by no means straightforward and it remains an ongoing process.



## READ MORE

Taylor, S., Berridge, V. & Mold, A. (2016): *WHO expert committees and key concepts for drugs, alcohol and tobacco 1949-2013*, in Hellman, M., Berridge, V., Mold A., & Duke, K. (eds.) *Concepts of Addictive Substances Across Time and Place*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Berridge, V., Edman, J., Mold, A., & Taylor, S.: *Addiction through the ages*. Addiction and Lifestyles in Contemporary Europe: Reframing Addictions Project (ALICE RAP): [Deliverable 1.1](#)