



Addiction throughout the ages – historical myth-busting and fascinating facts

WP 1 – ‘Addictions through the ages’ is concerned with the changing conception of addiction across time and place. We are interested in the language used to describe alcohol, drug and tobacco use from the nineteenth century up until the present. Partners from Poland, Austria, Italy, Sweden and the UK are looking at the terms used to describe problem substance use both before and after the ‘discovery’ of addiction. There will also be some international studies which will cover the role of WHO, EMCDDA, and the international conferences of ICAA.

Certain things about the history of drugs and alcohol will be familiar to many of you, but some of them may actually be myths!

Five historical points about addictions which you thought were true, but aren't

1. Queen Victoria smoked cannabis and took it during childbirth.
2. U.S. alcohol prohibition 'failed'.
3. 'Addiction' as a term has always existed.
4. 'Addiction' means the same thing in different countries.
5. Drinking patterns are ingrained within national cultures and do not fluctuate over time.

Six amazing historical facts about addictions

1. There is no evidence to suggest that Queen Victoria took cannabis in childbirth¹. Her physician had introduced the drug to Britain from India but its medical use was very limited. The drug only came under international drug control in the 1920s because of pressure from the Egyptians, not because it was a 'problem' in other countries or internationally. Cannabis was used quite extensively in Egypt, but the government also wanted to demonstrate their post-colonial independence from the British by restricting trade in the substance.²
2. There is some evidence to suggest that U.S. prohibition actually 'worked' in many ways: admissions to lunatic asylums for alcohol related illnesses declined, and so did death rates from cirrhosis and alcohol induced violence. Overall, consumption decreased, and patterns of drinking changed: beer consumption fell and spirit drinking rose, although not to pre-Prohibition levels.³
3. Several of the ALICE RAP partner countries had no word for 'addiction' in the early twentieth century, nor did they have medical journals discussing the concept.⁴

Inebriety was a dominant concept, covering drink and drugs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain and the US, but it was not at all important in the rest of Europe.⁵

4. Different scientific specialisations have been involved in promoting 'addiction' as a concept across Europe. In Britain it was promoted initially by public health doctors, whereas in Italy it was put forward by forensic scientists.⁶

5. Alcohol consumption patterns change considerably over time and place. Since 1950, alcohol consumption has decreased in countries such as France and Italy, whereas in the Scandinavian countries, and places like Britain and Germany, alcohol consumption rose between 1950 and 1970, and has levelled off since then.⁷

6. Viewed within the well-being frame: a rise in the standard of living (which might indicate more disposable income) does not automatically lead to higher alcohol consumption. In Britain after 1870, real wages rose but alcohol consumption fell.⁸ Factors such as different leisure activities, holidays with pay, and shorter working hours were involved. Being better off does not lead to higher drink consumption automatically.

References

- ¹ Virginia Berridge, 'Public or policy understanding of history?', *Social History of Medicine*, 16:3 (2003) 511-23.
- ² James Mills, *Cannabis Britannica: Empire, Trade and Prohibition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ³ Jack Blocker, 'Did Prohibition really work? Alcohol prohibition as a public health innovation', *American Journal of Public Health*, 96:2 (2006) pp. 233-43.
- ⁴ Presentation by Grażyna Herczyńska and Jacek Moskalewicz at WP1 workshop, March 2012.
- ⁵ Virginia Berridge, 'Punishment or treatment? Inebriety, drink and drugs, 1860-2004', *The Lancet*, 364 (2004) 4-5.
- ⁶ Presentation by Franca Beccaria at WP1 workshop, March 2012.
- ⁷ Håkken Leifman, 'Trends in population drinking' in Thor Norström (ed.) *Alcohol in Postwar Europe: Trends in Drinking Patterns, Consequences and Policy Responses in 15 European Countries* (Stockholm: National Institute of Public Health, 2002) pp. 49-81.
- ⁸ James Kneale, Memorandum to the House of Commons Alcohol Health Committee, April 2009. Available from: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmhealth/151/151we16.htm>

We would encourage all Areas and Work Packages to think about change over time in addiction as well as across geographical regions and between different substances or activities. If you come across anything in the course of your work that might be of interest to historians, then do please get in touch with [Virginia](#) or [Alex](#)