Why should we discuss cost-of-alcohol studies?

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As cost-of-alcohol studies have proliferated, so has the debate about their validity persisted. The fact that these calculations are often both conceptually and methodologically problematic has been a matter of scholarly polemic for decades. In this issue, Klaus Mäkelä presents his critique of the most recent international attempts to calculate the total cost of alcohol for society (Mäkelä 2012).

Mäkelä’s article, with commentaries, continues a debate addressed in this journal in (4) 2010. In the introduction to the 2010 issue, I quoted Gunnar Myrdal, who was highly critical of such studies already in 1930 (Myrdal 1930). He argued that calculations of the total profit and loss of alcohol for "society" – which he could not conceive of as an "appraising and goal-setting subject" – was meaningless, nothing for honest researchers and would only lead political decision-makers astray. As several of the researchers in the current debate note, critique has been a constant companion of cost-of-alcohol studies. What we present in this issue is not a new debate, but one that may be more relevant than ever before.

We are proud to publish these thought-provoking, well-written, even entertaining, and definitely important texts.

The topic may seem too theoretical or even irrelevant for many addiction researchers, but I would strongly recommend reading Mäkelä’s article and the commentaries of accomplished and eminent researchers. The authors raise fundamental questions about the importance of conceptual clarity in alcohol research, about to what extent science is self-correcting, about the relation between values and facts, and about the relation between research and politics.

Mäkelä and most of the commentators note that the number of cost-of-alcohol studies keeps growing, mainly because politicians request these studies from the researchers. Critical scientists have not been able to convince politicians that attempts to summarise the social impact of alcohol in monetary terms are too speculative or uncertain. While politicians insist on commissioning them, research is of course not independent of political request.

This growing demand is somewhat peculiar, because there seems to be a rather strong agreement among the researchers that summary measures in monetary terms are not much help in making decisions about specific, ef-
ffective alcohol policy measures. It seems, however, that the mere function of a summary measure that attracts attention to alcohol is motivation enough to request such studies.

In this debate, several matters are clearly contested:

1) Are cost-of-alcohol studies by necessity so unclear conceptually that they should not be performed? Or can and should they be improved through collegial critique, more tailored approaches and by increased sensitivity? Would this make them more sensible and useful? Is this the duty of alcohol researchers in the first place, or should they rather refuse to perform them?

2) Is money a reasonable, the best available, or the (only) legitimate, comprehensive measure that can cover all social consequences? Or does a summary measure of very different negative effects in dollars or euros give a false sense of exactness and precision, which prevents a discussion about value judgements in the choice of political measures? Do these figures, as Øyvind Horverak writes, enable politicians not to discuss social values, compassion or solidarity behind unpopular restrictions? Can they instead simply refer to research as “value-free arguments” (Horverak 2010)?

3) Are these cost-calculations necessary in order to avoid alcohol problems from becoming politically sidestepped, compared to other fields where such studies are performed? Or will they eventually invite alternative, equally defensible or questionable, estimations? These can, for instance, originate from the alcohol industry and include the benefits of drinking. And will these competing results in the end undermine the credibility of alcohol research?

Such questions should of course be discussed by politicians and decision-makers. These texts should be recommended reading for them, too. The reading may take some effort, but the effort will pay off.

**Literature**

