AHA Science Advisory on Wine and Health: A Confusing Message About Alcohol Consumption

To the Editor:

I believe that the recent AHA Science Advisory on wine and health\(^1\) may have confused, rather than clarified, this complex topic. The advisory should have first addressed the relation of alcohol to coronary heart disease (CHD) and then discussed the potential advantages of wine. Unfortunately, the discussion alternated back and forth between alcohol and wine and between moderate drinking and heavy drinking, the last of which is universally acknowledged to be harmful.

In the sections on the biological basis of a protective effect of alcohol, the advisory failed to mention a number of experiments showing that alcohol consistently raises HDL in both animals and humans and that alcohol is a more important determinant of HDL in the population than are exercise or other lifestyle habits.\(^2\)–\(^3\) The advisory mentioned the dangers of negative inotropic effects of alcohol but failed to note recent studies showing that moderate drinking reduces the complications of congestive heart failure.\(^4\) Furthermore, the statement in the advisory, “Patients who are hypertensive should avoid alcoholic beverages,” cannot be supported by scientific evidence. Heavy drinkers obviously should be advised to decrease their consumption, but a conversion to complete abstinence may increase their risk of stroke and other complications of hypertension. As for diet, it was stated by Willett in 1990\(^5\) and continues to be true: Scientific data for the cardioprotective effects of alcohol remain far stronger than that for all other dietary constituents.

What should be the message about alcohol consumption? In my opinion, scientific data now show the following: (1) Heavy alcohol consumption has many adverse health and societal consequences. (2) The moderate consumption of alcohol among middle-aged and older adults is clearly associated with lower risk of CHD and with lower total mortality. (3) Although a randomized trial has not been done, the consistent results of epidemiological studies, as well as growing insights into the mechanisms of alcohol’s effects on reducing atherogenesis and thrombosis, suggest a causal cardioprotective effect of alcohol. (4) Although nonalcoholic compounds in wine have been shown to favorably affect many biological processes related to CHD, epidemiological data currently are inconclusive on whether wine leads to greater cardioprotection than do other beverages.

In a culture in which cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death, telling people to avoid any alcohol consumption because of potential dangers or unproven theories is not, in my opinion, in the best health interests of the public. Let us not be afraid to tell the truth.

R. Curtis Ellison, MD

Professor of Medicine and Public Health
Director, Institute on Lifestyle and Health
Boston University School of Medicine
Boston, Mass

AHA Science Advisory on Wine and Health: A Confusing Message About Alcohol Consumption
R. Curtis Ellison

Circulation. 2001;104:e72
Circulation is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
Copyright © 2001 American Heart Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
Print ISSN: 0009-7322. Online ISSN: 1524-4539

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/104/13/e72

Permissions: Requests for permissions to reproduce figures, tables, or portions of articles originally published in Circulation can be obtained via RightsLink, a service of the Copyright Clearance Center, not the Editorial Office. Once the online version of the published article for which permission is being requested is located, click Request Permissions in the middle column of the Web page under Services. Further information about this process is available in the Permissions and Rights Question and Answer document.

Reprints: Information about reprints can be found online at:
http://www.lww.com/reprints

Subscriptions: Information about subscribing to Circulation is online at:
http://circ.ahajournals.org//subscriptions/