

Drinking's role in alcohol-related deaths greatly under-reported in media

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(Medical Xpress)—Researchers expressed concern that the lack of awareness of the role of alcohol in deaths impacts on support for public health measures.

Reports of confirmed alcohol-related deaths in Irish newspapers are failing to reflect the role of [alcohol consumption](#) in these fatalities, a new study has found.

The study by Dr John Fagan, Senior Registrar in Child and Adolescent psychiatry, Children's University Hospital, Temple Street, Dr Suzi Lyons, Senior Researcher, Health Research Board, and Dr Bobby Smyth, Clinical Senior Lecturer in Addiction Studies, School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin which has recently been published in the journal

Alcohol & Alcoholism, looked at the newspaper reporting of alcohol-related deaths in Ireland over a two-year period.

These were deaths due to [alcohol poisoning](#) or trauma, including choking, drowning, falls, road traffic collisions and fires, where alcohol was identified as a causal contributor to death. The research excluded deaths due to suicide and chronic alcohol-related medical conditions.

The study found that in 100 reports of 43 deaths, in both national and local newspapers, not one article reported that a person was drunk. Only two articles, about the same person, stated clearly that a deceased person had been drinking for a prolonged period of time before their death.

Two thirds of the articles (67%) omitted any mention or suggestion of alcohol use whatsoever. In one third of articles where the possibility of alcohol consumption was suggested, in 75% of these cases it was simply to indicate that the person had been 'socialising' prior to their death.

The study population was identified using the National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI) which is an epidemiological database that records all deaths due to drugs and/or alcohol poisoning (as well as deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol-dependent.) This database is maintained by the Health Research Board and is Government funded.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that every year at least 2.5 million people die prematurely as a result of the consumption of alcohol. Worldwide and in Europe, this makes alcohol the third leading cause of premature death and disability (Global Health Risks WHO, 2009). At least 25% of these early deaths involving alcohol are accidental in nature. Irish research indicates that alcohol is involved in 35–60% of unintended deaths caused by drowning, fire, falls and road traffic collisions.

Dr John Fagan, Senior Registrar in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and co-author of the report said: "In most newspaper reports into these alcohol related deaths, there was absolutely no suggestion of any alcohol use. Where drinking was hinted at, this was via use of vague and ambiguous euphemisms such as 'socialising' in most cases."

He continued: "The largest category of deaths was alcohol poisonings with about 130 such deaths per annum. These deaths were the least likely to be reported in newspapers. Surprisingly, where alcohol poisoning deaths were reported, alcohol use was less likely to be mentioned or suggested when compared to the articles on deaths due to falls, fires, drowning and road traffic collisions."

"While generally unwilling to speculate on any possible role played by alcohol in these deaths, we found that journalists did demonstrate a willingness to speculate on other factors, such as road conditions or walls around rivers, as possible contributors to the deaths," said Dr Fagan.

The authors speculate about possible reasons for this failure by newspapers to consider or acknowledge alcohol as a contributory factor to a death. These could include the newspaper's editorial policy and a desire on the part of the journalist to protect the reputation of the deceased and their family. It was also considered that journalists, in some cases, may not be informed by the Gardaí that the person had been drinking prior to their death, leaving them unable to report on this fact.

Dr Bobby Smyth, Clinical Senior Lecturer in Addiction Studies in Trinity said: "The key issue that arises from this study is that the Irish public are being left almost completely in the dark about the role which alcohol plays in dozens of deaths each year. For whatever reason, journalists in Irish newspapers are not reporting on the fact of alcohol use by people prior to their deaths."

Dr Smyth continued: "If a person drowns after being washed into sea by a freak wave while walking along a pier at 2pm, then that is an entirely unpredictable tragedy. If a person drowns after going for a swim on a dangerous beach at 1am, having spent the previous five hours downing a large quantity of alcohol, that type of death is qualitatively different. Our study indicates that both such deaths are likely to be presented to the public as tragic accidents, with alcohol almost completely airbrushed out of the reporting of the second [death](#)."

"We would urge journalists to seek information about alcohol consumption by people prior to deaths in circumstances which are frequently alcohol-related and, if drinking did occur, to report it clearly, avoiding use of coded language such as terms like 'socialising'. This would allow the public to make more informed decisions regarding their own drinking behaviour and also regarding their support for strategies to reduce [alcohol](#)-related harm, such as the recently released Public Health Alcohol Bill. Better and more accurate information may avert future deaths in similar circumstances."

More information: J. Fagan, S. Lyons, and Bobby P. Smyth. "Content Analysis of Newspaper Reports on Alcohol-Related Deaths." *Alcohol and Alcoholism* first published online April 15, 2014 [DOI: 10.1093/alcalc/agu015](#)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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