



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Alcoholism in Kenya: The Sober Truth

The dialogue surrounding alcohol consumption in Kenya deliberated on the urgent and intricate interplay of psychological, socio-cultural, and health-related factors. The 2018 World Health Organization (WHO) report raises concerns as it reveals that 44% of alcohol sold in Kenya is illicit, also known as unrecorded alcohol. This finding shed light on broader challenges within the country's alcohol industry. Furthermore, a study by the Alcoholic Beverages Association of Kenya (ABAK) revealed that 59% of alcohol consumed in Kenya is counterfeit, equating to six out of ten bottles.

Understanding Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD):

According to Dr Catherine Gitau, Psychiatrist at Aga Khan University Hospital, alcohol use disorder (AUD) is a complex and persistent condition characterised by the compulsive consumption of alcohol despite its negative consequences. Symptoms of AUD include the inability to control alcohol intake, continued drinking despite adverse effects on work, school, or relationships, and increased tolerance to alcohol. These manifestations of the disorder often point to an underlying and concealed struggle.

Is there 'Responsible Drinking'?

This is a very controversial topic. Rehabilitation experts object that there is anything like responsible drinking. They argued that once someone in most cases people end up getting hooked to alcohol and reversing that is not easy.

However, medical experts provide varying consumption guidelines. According to Dr Catherine Gitau, the common guidelines recommend that women limit their alcohol intake to 2 to 3 drinks per day, with a weekly limit of fourteen drinks. Men should limit their intake to 3 to 4 drinks per day, with a weekly limit of fifteen drinks. Cultural differences and individual tolerances can influence these guidelines.

Responsible advertising

There was a call for manufacturers and traders of alcohol to be practice responsible advertising of their products to protect children and recovering addicts.

“As responsible brand owners, we vet influencers and brand ambassadors to ensure they are responsible citizens. We also train them on what to post and the set time of day to ensure that we adhere to the guidelines,” committed Eric Githua, the Chairman of the Alcoholic Beverages Association of Kenya.

A Multifaceted Approach to Addressing Alcoholism in Kenya:

Alcohol is a psychoactive substance that significantly affects brain function and challenges the concept of 'responsible drinking.' Even moderate alcohol consumption can lead to substantial psychological effects, including impaired judgment and the potential for

dependence. For individuals in recovery, the risk of relapse can extend for up to two years. “It emphasises the critical need for a supportive environment to sustain sobriety,” adds Caroline Kagia, an addictions therapist, speaker, and wellness coach.

In Kenya, addressing the challenges related to alcohol consumption involves a multi-pronged approach. It is imperative to set up legitimate channels for the production and sale of alcohol to mitigate the risks associated with counterfeit products, which pose serious health hazards and even potential fatalities. Dr Raymond Omollo, the Principal Secretary of Internal Security and National Administration states that public awareness and educational programs play a crucial role in informing the public about the dangers of excessive and illegal alcohol consumption. Towards this, he said that the government has launched a comprehensive vetting process to regulate alcohol production and promote safe consumption practices. Support from the community is significant for individuals dealing with addiction. Institutions, including churches, offer a wide range of rehabilitation services crucial for providing effective treatment, compassion, and understanding in the face of societal stigma. These essential services empower individuals in recovery to successfully rejoin society.

Conclusion:

Dr Raymond Omollo, concludes that in addressing the issue of alcoholism in Kenya we need a multifaceted approach that combines regulatory measures, educational initiatives, and support systems. It is crucial to recognise the detrimental impact of illicit and counterfeit alcohol consumption and to prioritise responsible drinking practices. By doing so, Kenya can reduce the associated health risks and help individuals seeking recovery. Establishing a safe and informed environment is paramount to ensuring the overall well-being of its citizens and nurturing a healthier and more prosperous future for the nation.