Don't feel guilty – have a beer

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Opinion

Do you feel guilty supping a glass of beer? In all the years I have been writing on the subject, I have never known such a flood of one-sided and often nonsensical news stories about the alleged dangers of alcohol. Newspapers and magazines all tell the same story: we’re going to hell in the famous handcart if we touch beer or any other type of alcohol. The tsunami of stories is the result of a clever campaign by the anti-alcohol lobby and in particular by the temperance movement. The man leading the charge against drinking is Dr Tim Stockwell of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. He’s also a professor at the University of Victoria in British Columbia and he’s written on the subject for the highly regarded medical journal, The Lancet. Stockwell is influential to the extent that both the Canadian and Australian governments are producing new guidelines on the consumption of alcohol and the United States may follow suit. The British press is whipping up a scare. The Guardian has led the pack, with usually two articles a week on the health risks of drinking. It’s now been joined by the Daily Telegraph, the Metro and Cosmopolitan magazine with more frenzied attacks on drinking. One woman writing in the Guardian said she was “horrified by Britain’s booze culture”. This ignores the fact that the consumption of alcohol has dropped substantially over the past decade, especially among younger people. Where beer is concerned, consumption and production have fallen, and the only major growth is NoLos – no and low alcohol products. And again, it’s mainly young people who are consuming them. But never mind the facts, just polish your prejudice and take your advice from Tim Stockwell. His critics in the medical field point out that he has close connections to the temperance movement. He’s the past president of the Kettil Bruun Society, a temperance think tank. He admits he’s been paid to speak at temperance meetings, including the Swedish Temperance Organisation, and he has connections to the International Order of Good Templars. Head of lifestyle economics at the Institute of Economic Affairs Christopher Snowdon said: “You have a neo-temperance movement operating in Britain and around the world.” He points out that the Institute of Alcohol Studies, which sounds like a reputable organisation, was formerly the UK Temperance Alliance. Stockwell’s mantra is there’s no safe level for drinking. It’s not new and it’s been said since the decision in 2016 by the chief medical officers in the UK to cut the recommended weekly units of alcohol for men from 21 to 14. According to the medical officers, not only should you drastically reduce the amount of beer you drink but it would be better if you didn’t drink at all. One argument for reducing or cutting out drinking is the risk of being struck down with cirrhosis of the liver. But critics in the medical profession point out that figures compiled by the Office for National Statistics for liver cirrhosis are recorded under the heading of “alcohol-related deaths” despite the fact that liver cirrhosis can also be caused by obesity, drugs and hepatitis C. Dr Stockwell clearly has friends in high places. But he does face critics among his peer group, including in Canada. Dr Dan Malleck, alcohol policy specialist at Brock University, Ontario, said the focus on harm caused by alcohol misses many of the unquantifiable benefits of drinking. “Mild, moderate drinking loosens people up,” he said, “creates social bonds, boosts creativity and innovation as well as just encouraging relaxation.” Sir David Spiegelhalter, professor for the public understanding of risk at Cambridge University and a former president of the Royal Society, said the new guidelines give you a less than one per cent chance of dying from an alcohol-related condition. He adds: “Risks of this level such as watching TV for an hour a day or eating a bacon sandwich a couple of times a week are actually more harmful to our long-term health.” Of course, we should drink carefully and moderately. Speaking personally, I have written more than 20 books, edited 24 editions of the Good Beer Guide and write for a number of newspapers and magazines. I couldn’t have achieved that work rate if I were falling down in a drunken heap most of the time. But I look forward to a good glass of beer and don’t need advice from Dr Stockwell and his kill-joy chums. As president Franklin Roosevelt said on 5 December 1933, when Prohibition in the United States ended: “Today would be a good day for a beer.”