

DISPATCHES

Alcohol consumption in Japan: different culture, different rules

When darkness falls and blinking neon brightens the often drab cities and towns of Japan, white-collar workers crowd into tiny bars — there are 15 000 in Tokyo alone — and unwind by sipping Suntory Gold whisky and water at \$15 a shot. Tradesmen and labourers head for “standbars” and gulp down plastic cups of *shochu*, cheaper distilled spirits dispensed from vending machines. And although there is little absenteeism in Japan due to drinking, the country’s doctors are worried — problem drinkers numbered 3 million at the last tally.

Japan’s thirst has continued unabated long after the economic twilight fell on the Land of the Rising Sun. “There is no question that alcoholism is increasing in Japan,” says Dr. Hiorakai Kono, former director of the National Institute of Alcoholism in Tokyo. “What astonishes us is the size of the problem.”

Problem drinking cuts across all levels of society, according to the latest study by the Leisure Development Research Centre in Tokyo. Sixty percent of problem drinkers are salaried businessmen who claim that getting drunk with clients or coworkers is part of their job and a mark of company loyalty. To refuse a drink from the boss is a terrible insult that can damage a career. And although alcohol consumption is now decreasing in most industrialized countries, it has quadrupled in Japan since 1960.

Drinking is not a moral issue here, since there is no religious prohibition against alcohol consumption, and the temperance movement has never had an impact. And unlike many Westerners, the Japanese don’t regard alcohol as a drug.

Traditionally, there has been an indulgent attitude toward those who drink too much — and for good reason. In a tightly knit society where concealing emotions and frustrations is a highly developed and necessary part of maintaining “consensus,” getting drunk is a socially sanctioned safety valve. “Alcohol here plays the role of psychiatry in the West,” says Charles Pomeroy, former president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan and a Tokyo resident for 45 years. “I think the country would explode without it.”

Japan lags far behind Western countries in recognizing and treating alcoholism. Fewer than 1200 hospital beds are available for alcoholic patients, and the country’s 2 national mental hospitals provide only 200 beds. Private treatment centres are becoming more common, but no medical credentials or accreditation are required to operate them.

There are 5 halfway houses, all run by religious groups, but for the most part follow-up and rehabilitation services do not exist. Instead, families, aided by groups such as Japan’s version of Alcoholics Anonymous, take on the burden of rehabilitation. — *Dave Milne, Tokyo*



Dave Milne

One for the road

Tobacco use up in smoke

The number of Canadians who smoke continues to drop, the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS) indicates. In 2001, 22% of Canadians aged 15 and over — 5.4 million people — were smokers, compared with 24% in 2000 and 31% in 1994.

CTUMS, conducted by Statistics Canada on behalf of Health Canada, found that the percentage of women smokers dropped from 23% to 20% between 2000 and 2001; the percentage of men who smoke remained constant at 24%.

Progress was also made among youth aged 15–19, with rates declining from 25% in 2000 to 22.5% in 2001. Adults aged 20 to 24 still have the highest smoking rate of any group, 32%, and this remained unchanged from 2000.

Respondents were also asked their opinion on smoking in bars and restaurants. Although most (77%) thought there should be severe restrictions in restaurants, only 55% favoured severe restrictions in bars. The survey also revealed that Canadians are smoking only 16 cigarettes a day today, compared with 21 in 1985. — *CMAJ*

Hospital is Nova Scotia’s Environmental Institution of the Year

The 130-bed Dartmouth General Hospital, which has run an extensive recycling program for at least 5 years, has been named Nova Scotia’s Environmental Institution of the Year. “Everything that can be recycled is recycled,” says Jane Pryor, who oversees the operation of the hospital. It even recycles fryer fat — last year more than half a tonne was sent to a local firm that cleans it for use in animal feed.

The hospital was also praised for reducing waste. Last year it recycled 13 000 kg of cardboard, a 19% reduction from the previous year, while the amount of recycled newspaper declined by 32% and the amount of organic material sent for composting fell by 19%. Pryor thinks the declines reflect, in part, efforts to place more emphasis on environmentally friendly packaging, reusable material and reduced use. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*