

Medical Declarations on Temperance

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Summary

As early as 1736, the Royal College of Physicians submitted to Parliament a representation concerning the excessive consumption of spirituous liquors. No further authoritative statement was made for nearly a century, by which time the first Temperance and Total Abstinence societies had been formed. Many medical men were happy to support the call for moderation and a number of societies issued declarations signed by local practitioners; however, fear of losing patients meant that few doctors supported total abstinence. In addition, alcohol was widely used as a therapeutic agent. In spite of this, declarations were issued in 1839 and in 1847 which were essentially "teetotal" in tone. Most of the declarations were reported only in the temperance journals. That of 1871 was entirely different; it was circulated to every doctor on the medical register and publicised in full in all the national newspapers. It was signed by the Presidents of the Royal Colleges and by 233 others; it condemns the "inconsiderate prescription" of alcohol and questions its value as a food or as a medicine. The therapeutic arguments and the impact of the volte face of the medical establishment in supporting the declaration are examined, as is the reaction of the lay press.

Résumé

Dès 1736, le Collège royal des Médecins a présenté au Parlement un rapport au sujet de la consommation extrême des spiritueux. Durant un siècle, il n'y avait plus eu d'exposé de cette nature faisant autorité; dans l'intervalle, les sociétés de tempérance et d'abstinence totale se sont organisées. Les médecins furent contents de seconder l'appel à la modération et quelques sociétés ont publié des déclarations signées par des médecins de quartier; cependant, la crainte de perdre des clients provoqua un manque d'appui pour l'abstinence complète. En plus, l'alcool était partout utilisé comme agent thérapeutique. Malgré cela, des déclarations sortirent en 1839 et en 1847, elles furent rédigées en des termes qui pouvaient encourager l'approbation des indépendants. La majorité des déclarations ne furent annoncées que dans les journaux de tempérance. Celle de 1871 fut totalement différente. On l'a envoyée à chaque médecin repris sur les registres des médecins et on en fit une publication complète dans tous les journaux nationaux. La déclaration fut signée par les Présidents des Collèges royaux et par 233 autres. La déclaration condamne "la prescription inconsidérée d'alcool" et remet en question sa valeur en tant que nourriture ou médicament. Les arguments thérapeutiques et le choc du volte-face de l'établissement médical à l'appui de la déclaration sont examinés avec le contre-coup de la presse du jour.

What would appear to be the first formal authoritative pronouncement by the medical profession on the subject of alcohol abuse was made in 1725. It took the form of a 'humble representation' by the College of Physicians in

London and was addressed to the 'Honbl the House of Commons.' It was entrusted to Dr John Freind, Member of Parliament for Launceston but its subsequent fate is unknown. The document read as follows :

"... we have with concern observed, for some years past, the fatal effects of the frequent use of several sorts of distilled

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spirituous liquors upon great numbers of both sexes, rendering them diseased, not fit for business, poor, a burthen to themselves and neighbours and too often the cause of weak, feeble and distempered children, who must be, instead of an advantage and strength, a charge to their country..." (1).

The College's declaration was issued as the 'gin craze' was reaching a climax. Four years later, in 1729 (2), an Act introduced the licensing of retailers and prohibited street trading. It was soon repealed but a series of subsequent enactments and rises in excise duty, although highly unpopular, was accompanied by a threefold drop in per capita consumption; by 1800, however, the peak figures of the early part of the century had again been matched and, thirty years later, well exceeded (3).

1830 is the year in which the English temperance movement began; members of temperance societies pledged themselves to abjure spirits, to avoid public houses (except on business!) and to be modest in their consumption of beer and wine - unless, of course, contrary medical advice was given. Such a moderate and sensible pledge seemed tailored to suit moderate and sensible people and the founder members of these societies typically included professionals such as clergymen and doctors. There were, for example, four doctors on the thirty-two strong committee of the Bradford society, the first to be formed in England (4). Medical men were especially in demand because they could give a scientific gloss to the message. Many local societies issued 'Medical Declarations' during the 1830s - fifteen doctors signed in Gloucester (5), nineteen in Derby (6), thirty two in Worcester. The wording of all such statements was similar, so much so that one feels there must have been an agreed formula. Typical is that from Brighton (7) issued in 1832 which read :

"We, the undersigned, do hereby declare our conviction that ardent spirits are not to

be regarded as a nourishing article of diet; that the habitual use of them is a principal cause of disease, poverty and misery, and that the disuse of them, except for medicinal purposes, would powerfully contribute to improve the health and comfort of the community."

Thirty four signed. Doctors appear to have been more than willing to put their names to these documents; that for Worcester (8) was signed by all the medical men in the city. Derby was said to have 23 practitioners; one signed all but the last clause, two refused, two were out of town; nineteen signed (sic !) (6).

The widespread medical support for the anti-spirits movement (support which well predates the temperance societies themselves (9) contrasts starkly with a lack of enthusiasm for the total abstinence ('teetotal') cause. Part of the reason for this was social; teetotallers were outspoken, demonstrative and tainted by association with dissenters, radicals, even chartists (10) - not the sort of company which an aspiring professional would seek; furthermore a doctor who tries radically to alter his patient's life style is not going to thrive in competition with more permissive colleagues. There was, however, another equally important factor and this was the perception of alcohol as a valuable, possibly essential therapeutic agent. It was held to be particularly useful in prolonged debilitating fevers where it acted as a nutritional support; it also possibly had a specific stimulant action on nerve tissue.

The one name most closely associated with alcohol therapy was that of Dr Robert Bentley Todd(1809-1860); a persuasive writer and a brilliant and influential teacher, he confirmed the orthodoxy of the treatment whilst, in his own practice, developing a dosage regime of heroic proportions. In his posthumously published volumes of clinical lectures (11) he instances a nurse whom he treated for septicaemia by giving

her six pints of brandy over the course of a month. Harrison (12) quotes him as giving to a patient six pints in seventy two hours. It is small wonder that teetotal doctors initially, if grudgingly, accorded some value to alcohol as therapy. Even Henry Mudge, who eventually wrote a book on the treatment of disease without alcohol, at first accepted the orthodox opinion (13). A teetotal declaration, therefore, had to be carefully worded. What is described in the teetotal press as the 'First Medical Declaration' was drawn up by Dr Julius Jefferies "inventor of the respirator" in 1839 (14). The declaration explicitly denied that the habitual use of any alcoholic drink was beneficial to health, and averred that it was not "necessary for those subjected to physical labour. Large quantities do sooner or later prove injurious to the human constitution, without any exception". It stopped short, however, of total prohibition. Some prestigious names are included among its seventy eight signatories but although reprinted many times in various temperance publications, it does not seem to have been publicised either in the national press or in the mainstream medical journals.

An altogether more ambitious effort was made by John Dunlop, a pioneer temperance worker. He very soon saw the need to 'convert the doctors' and the process of amassing signatures is recorded in his diary (15) where his wry sense of humour is given full reign :

"Many a scold the medical applicants received ... (the doctor's) idea was that a doctor's duty lay in healing his own patient but not in assisting in measures to lessen the number of theses generally I Let us hope that the amount of such homicides is small... apart from such considerations, a sober community would pay their bills better than is done at present."

Early in 1847 he writes
"... much harassed by temperance men from all quarters on the publication of the medical declaration ... this is one desired object but not in the present tumultuous state of phy-

siological opinion on alcohol and when only a mere fraction of the medical world have acquiesced, immense numbers refusing to sign."

This 'tumultuous state of physiological opinion' was occasioned by Leibig's view, published in 1843, that alcohol, being totally assimilated (i.e. metabolised) in the body, protected the tissues from destructive oxydation. Further evidence suggested that it had a particular affinity for nervous tissue (16), both findings providing scientific support for Todd's clinical practice. The development of alternative views of the mode of action of alcohol has been reviewed by Warner (17) who, however, points out that clinicians were more prone to adapt physiological findings to their clinical beliefs than to adjust their clinical practice in the light of physiological advances.

The Dunlop declaration had a long gestation. A version was presented to the World Temperance Convention in 1846 but was modified in order to attract more support and finally issued in April 1847 with 1,000 signatures, a figure that was eventually doubled. The wording was carefully chosen to avoid committing any of the signatories to a particular course of action whilst at the same time emphasising the dangers of all forms of alcohol.

We, the undersigned are of the opinion

- 1) that a large portion of human misery, including poverty, disease and crime is induced by the use of alcoholic or fermented liquors or beverages.
- 2) that the most perfect health is compatible with total abstinence from all such intoxicating beverages, whether in the form of ardent spirits or as wine, beer, ale, porter, cider etc.
- 3) that persons accustomed to such drinks may, with perfect safety, discontinue them entirely, either at once or gradually after a short time.
- 4) that the total and universal abstinence from alcoholic liquors and beverages of all sorts

would greatly contribute to the health and prosperity, the morality and happiness of the human race.

Once again there was little mention in the medical press, although (Sir) John Forbes who had been instrumental in obtaining the signatures of Sir James Clark and a reluctant Sir Benjamin Brodie referred to it in a article (described by Dunlop as a splendid 'blow-out') (18) in his *British and Foreign Medical Review*(19). This is a restrained and critical assesment of temperance arguments. The writer is clearly sympathetic and there is more reliance on anecdotal evidence than would be acceptable today, but the physiological and therapeutic aspects are fully set out in what is a useful and comprehensive review. As it happens Dunlop issued the declaration with some diffidence, noting in his diary :

"The certificate is little known out of temperance circles and is generally despised there (when known) since the doctors still drink. On the whole, the stroke of the movement is to get 7,000 more names on the certificate - this would settle and compose the medical world into solidity."

Despite this comment, some attempt was made to advertise nationally and Dunlop notes "The daily London press begins to speak more favourably ... a favourable sidewind from the slaygood *Times*."

These declarations, if they did nothing else, helped to create an identifiable medical temperance lobby. In the decade following Todd's death in 1860 (with, if not from, hepatic cirrhosis (20)) the debate on the merits and demerits of alcohol as therapy was carried on, perhaps with less passion, in the columns of the medical press. Lallemand's view (21) that alcohol was not metabolised in the body but excreted unchanged, was accepted with enthusiasm by the movement as destroying the whole rationale of the treatment. Chambers referred to the

French work in describing alcohol as a drug whose... "primary action is anaesthetic, causing a diminution of vitality of the nervous system" - a statement which was the subject of a editorial in the *British Medical Journal* (22). In 1862 John Higginbottom produced for the 30th Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association in Exeter a review of forty years experience of the non-alcoholic treatment of disease (23) whilst in 1868 Dr Gairdner, speaking at the same meeting in Oxford, explicitly condemned the excesses of Todd although accepting that alcohol, in smaller doses did have some value (24).

By the end of the decade it was clear that there was a need for a dispassionate and reasoned debate on the subject both of alcohol as therapy and of alcohol in the diet. Such a call was made by Eastwood (25) and was echoed by Ernest Hart, himself a sympathiser, in an editorial. The original intention was to set up a conference of "medical men, including those of the highest class ... with a view to giving the subject a more thorough discussion than it has yet had." (26) The editorial referred not unfavourably to an article by a Dr Mc Murtry "On the Duties of Medical Men in relation to the Temperance Movement" which had been published in the *Medical Temperance Journal* (27). Hart was then contacted by Mr Rae, secretary of the National Temperance League, presumably with a view to organising such a discussion.

The call for a debate resulted in a series of temperance breakfasts, hosted by the League and held during the annual meetings of the B.M.A. - a series which lasted 40 years and may well have turned what appeared originally to be the views of fanatical extremists into a proper subject for enquiry. A second outcome was yet another declaration.

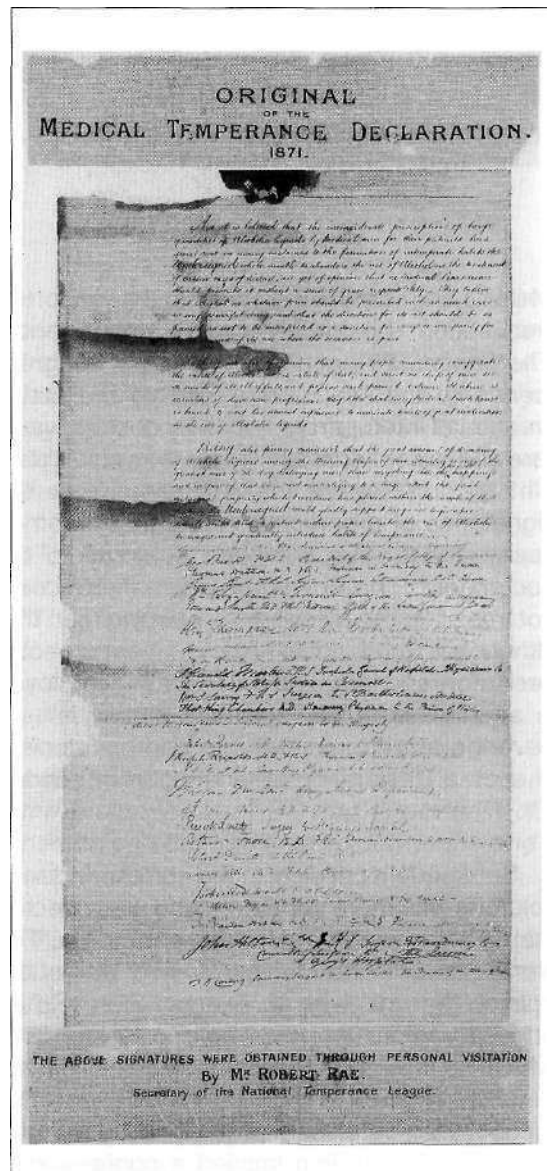
The 1871 Medical Declaration concerning Alcohol was a remarkable document. It is best quoted in full:

"As it is believed that the inconsiderate prescription of large quantities of alcoholic liquors by medical men for their patients has given rise, in many instances, to the formation of intemperate habits, the undersigned, while unable to abandon the use of alcohol in the treatment of certain cases of disease, are yet of the opinion that no medical practitioner should prescribe it without a sense of grave responsibility. They believe that alcohol, in whatever form, should be prescribed with as much care as any powerful drug, and that the directions for its use should be so framed as not to be interpreted as a sanction for excess, or necessarily for the continuance of its use when the occasion is past.

They are also of the opinion that many people immensely exaggerate the value of alcohol as an article of diet, and since no class of men see so much of its ill effects, and possess such power to restrain its abuse, as members of their own profession, they hold that every medical practitioner is bound to exert his utmost influence to inculcate habits of great moderation in the use of alcoholic liquors.

Being also firmly convinced that the great amount of drinking of alcoholic liquors among the working classes of this country is one of the greatest evils of the day, destroying (more than anything else) the health, happiness and welfare of those classes, and neutralising, to a large extent, the great industrial prosperity which Providence has placed within the reach of this nation, the undersigned would gladly support any wise legislation which would tend to restrict, within proper limits, the use of alcoholic beverages, and gradually introduce habits of temperance.

278 signatures were appended and it is clear that here were the great and the good of the profession. The Presidents of both Royal



Colleges and the President of the General Council of Medical Education headed the list which included 39 Fellows of the Royal Society, 67 physicians and 52 surgeons from major London hospitals (including not a few from Todd's old hospital, King's College), 66 provincial hospital physicians and others with senior positions in the Army or at Court.

Elaborate measures were taken to ensure maximum publicity; the Declaration was printed in the leading medical journals and in the daily newspapers. A copy was sent by the National Temperance League to every doctor on the medical register. The immediate reaction in the editorial columns of the medical journals was encouraging. *The British Medical Journal* (28),

whilst taking some of the credit for the idea of the Declaration, repeated its call for a conference. *The Lancet* (29), although generally in agreement with the sentiments, felt that the actual creation of intemperate habits by doctors was a rare and exceptional act. There was also a dark hint of surprise at the omission from the signatories of a particular name that "seemed necessary to give complete authority to the document." *The Edinburgh Journal* (30) could not resist a chauvinist dig, pointing out that although in Scotland "at no time... has alcohol... been more sparingly and considerably employed in all classes of disease than it now is ... it nevertheless appreciates the appropriateness of such a Declaration emanating from London

Subsequent criticism in the correspondence columns was more vehement and was directed mainly at the wording of the first paragraph. The North Staffordshire Medical Society was of the opinion that this was an exaggeration and an undeserved slur upon the whole profession (31), whilst the Islington Medical Society (32) did not admit that there was any ground to the belief that alcohol was carelessly prescribed by medical men; the Declaration implied a confession in which members of the society declined to participate. The society further felt that the profession should act independently of any association holding extreme views. This latter comment was doubtless occasioned by the fact that with the declaration, the National Temperance League, perhaps unwisely, enclosed the more explicitly teetotal Mc Murtry article (27) - described by *The Lancet* as "one of the most insulting and absurd pamphlets we have ever read". A similar line was taken by the *Medical Times and Gazette*(33):

"Dr Mc Murtry's attack on his professional brethren is scarcely worthy of even a passing notice in our columns. Wholesale assertion without proof and universal abuse without deserving are the usual characteristics of writers associated with what is foolishly called

the Temperance Movement."

More comment came from Todd's old pupils; first in the field was Dr F.C.Skey who was sufficiently incensed to spend time at Christmas writing to *The Times* and to the *British Medical Journal* (34) questioning the facts of the declaration. He had not himself witnessed the "many instances of intemperate habits engendered by the medical administration of alcohol" and did not believe them. Dr Francis Anstie, writing to *The Lancet* (35) was prepared to admit that doctors had occasionally done harm to their patients by injudicious prescriptions of alcohol, but not in any appreciable proportion to the total mass of intemperance. He took exception, however, to the suggestion that the dietetic value of alcohol had been immensely exaggerated. This assertion rekindled a lively correspondence on the subject of the physiological and therapeutic effects of alcohol which was reported in some detail (albeit in a partisan fashion) in *The Medical Temperance Journal* (36).

The League's foresight in issuing the declaration to the lay press was rewarded by editorial comment in most of the national papers, much of it favourable. *The Times* (37) whilst welcoming the initiative, felt that the matter was not proven :

"Do medical men recommend it and even prescribe it needlessly or incautiously without regard to proper limits and without taking due care?... Is the habitual consumption in our households of whatever class in excess of real requirements and therefore injurious? It is a very large question, or rather a bundle of questions ... it is not likely that we can hope to see (the controversy) settled, for that will not be in this generation."

The editor then enters a plea, echoed by a number of other papers :

"What a boon it would be to the health loving public to have at the hand and seal of these two hundred and fifty doctors a set of rules in



Statue of Dr ft B. Todd at King's College Hospital
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regard to food, drink, exercise and such matters... what is the proper allowance of solid food, of port, sherry and beer, of walking exercise ?"

To the reader of 1997, subjected to an avalanche of dietary advice, this request may seem a little naive. In point of fact a number of papers referred to Anstie's view, expounded in a letter to *The Spectator* (38) that the proper daily limit for the social, as opposed to the medical use of alcohol was 1 1/2-2 fl.oz. (measured as absolute alcohol) for men, half as much for women, amounts not markedly different from those proposed today. *The Spectator's* (39) own view was somewhat cynical :

"Of course, after the fight, very little good will be effected. The man or woman who likes alcohol will obtain an opinion that it is, in extreme moderation, beneficial, will interpret

moderation according to his or her ignorance or caprice and will consider himself or herself released from consequences by a half-fraudulent reliance upon a grossly exaggerated version of doubtful scientific advice... there ought to be a consensus on the subject and there is absolutely none..."

The optimism of *The Daily News* (36) makes an interesting contrast:

"The medical men deserve great credit for their warning. Its authority is commanding and, assuming the doctrine to be sound, its influence will, sooner or later, be irresistible... Rational beings are always governed in the main by the rules which they believe are for the prolongation of life and the benefit of health, and the habits of society in the end are always dictated by rational beings ..."

A different aspect was picked upon by the *Saturday Review* (40). Its editorial points to the danger of frequent small drinks (as opposed to the binge drinking allegedly characteristic of the lower classes) and goes on to say :

"If the doctors choose, they can do immense service by dissipating the superstitious exaggeration which prevails as to the value of alcohol as an article of diet, by warning their patients of the insidious fatal advance of the appetite for stimulants if once encouraged, by compelling them to reckon up the extent of their regular potations ..."

Perhaps the most informed and restrained comment comes from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, it combines an accurate report of the Declaration with an awareness of the clinical controversy which occasioned it - exonerating Dr Todd himself by saying that it was his misfortune to found a school of which he did not live to correct the excesses. The article was paid the compliment of a verbatim reprint in the *British Medical Journal* (41).

The 1871 Declaration was the last and,

judging by the reaction, the most effective of the medical pronouncements on alcohol during the nineteenth century. It is tempting but probably fruitless to try to assess its impact. In itself something of a nine days wonder, it was nevertheless one element of a decades long campaign by a well organised and vociferous minority which very probably induced in the doctors an awareness, not only of the problem, but of their responsibilities in relation to that problem.

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Biographical Note

The author is a retired general surgeon with a career-long interest in medical history. His particular interest in the medical aspects of the temperance movement stems from the fact that his grandfather so admired Sir Wilfrid Lawson (a parliamentary campaigner for legislative curbs on the sale of alcohol) that both his son and now his grandson carry middle name of Lawson.