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Statement by GAPA in response to the World Heart Federation’s policy brief on the impact of alcohol consumption on cardiovascular health

We wish to express our support for the recommendations made by the World Heart Federation in its policy brief on the use of alcohol products in relation to cardiovascular health.¹

Alcohol use is a leading risk factor for death, disability and many other harms.² The Global Burden of Disease study shows that the risk of death rises with increasing levels of alcohol consumption, and the level of alcohol use that minimises health loss is zero.³ Alcohol also causes multiple cancers, even at low to moderate levels of use.⁴ There is thus no safe level of alcohol consumption for everyone.

Whether low to moderate alcohol consumption reduces cardiovascular disease in some people remains contentious, as observational studies have limitations such as residual confounding and selection bias.^{5,6} However, substantial differences between the findings of such studies suggest that even if any “cardioprotective” effects exist, they cannot be assumed for all drinkers.⁷ More recently, Mendelian randomisation studies using genetic variants to proxy alcohol consumption have not shown cardioprotective associations.^{8,9} Taken together, the current evidence clearly supports population-level policies to reduce alcohol consumption.

Notably, there is increasing evidence that the alcohol industry misrepresents and funds scientific research on cardiovascular disease to downplay the harms of alcohol use. In a recent study, organisations funded by the alcohol industry were more likely to suggest that alcohol was protective against cardiovascular conditions on their websites, compared to non-industry funded organisations.¹⁰ Another study found that systematic reviews conducted by authors funded by the alcohol industry exclusively reported cardioprotective effects of alcohol, and were cited more often than other reviews.¹¹ The alcohol industry also funded a randomised controlled trial to investigate the possible cardioprotective effects of alcohol, which was eventually terminated due to the biased study design.¹²

To conclude, we call on governments to implement effective public health policies to reduce alcohol use, focusing on the World Health Organization’s SAFER interventions.¹³ We fully support the World Heart Federation’s appeal to national societies and organisations to play a central role in advocating for stricter alcohol control measures. The voices of civil society organisations independent of commercial interests are essential to counter the alcohol industry’s influence in the prevention and control of alcohol harms.

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