

THIS WEEK

EDITORIALS

CHANGES Three new titles join the Nature journal club **p.128**

FAME New chemical elements should honour Primo Levi **p.129**

FANTASTIC VOYAGE Fossil fins show secrets of swimming squid **p.131**



Solving the drink problem

The United Kingdom's new guidelines on alcohol consumption are a sound example of evidence-based policymaking.

In his landmark song 'Heroes', David Bowie sang: "I, I'll drink all the time." Alcohol played such a part in Bowie's life that many tributes have taken care to point out that the musician was a non-drinker at the time of his death at the weekend.

Britain has a curious relationship with alcohol, as generations of visitors from abroad have experienced and pondered first-hand on any given evening. Whereas the people of other countries might drink to be sociable or as part of a meal, large numbers of Britons, many have observed, tend to drink alcohol like someone is trying to take it away.

Well, now somebody is — at least according to the reaction of some media commentators to last week's shift in official government guidelines on how much alcohol consumption is advisable. Just in time to reinforce any wavering new-year pledges to cut down on drinking, the UK Chief Medical Officers announced that neither men nor women should consume more than 14 units of alcohol a week — around 7 glasses of wine or 6 pints of average-strength beer. For British men, the amount is substantially less than the previous maximum guideline of 21 units per week. (The new advice is, at this stage, only draft guidance.) The guide amount is also less than comparable advice issued by many other nations.

Predictably, most dissent focused on the political argument that the government has no business telling people how to live their lives, and, presumably, speed their own deaths. Right-wing UK politician Nigel Farage led the (only just tongue-in-cheek) calls for those outraged by the latest example of "nanny state" politics to protest by heading immediately to the pub.

Disagreement with the scientific and medical basis for the new guidelines was more half-hearted. Most people in Britain seem to grudgingly accept that drinking too much is a bad thing, just as they have for a series of antisocial and unhealthy behaviours targeted in recent times — driving without seatbelts, supermarkets placing racks of chocolate at tills at child-friendly heights, and smoking, for instance. (This is a nation, remember, that felt it had to point out in official guidance as recently as 1984 that 56 drinks in a single week was "too much".)

In fact, despite some attempts to whip up outrage, there are signs that the British government is pushing against an open door in its attempts to get people to drink less. Alcohol consumption is reportedly falling, the number of people who abstain entirely is increasing, and the plague of young binge drinkers is in decline.

The statement that there is no 'safe' level of alcohol consumption is a solid one. Those who wish to dispute this should first read the evidence produced by the guidelines development group for the Chief Medical Officers, which includes modelling to balance risks and benefits (see go.nature.com/aaudzp). It shows that the past 20 years have produced a wealth of new evidence strongly linking alcohol use to cancer risk. And — contrary to the legion of newspaper stories — the minor health benefits of drinking are realized only by women over the age of 55, and then only at very low consumption levels. Red wine won't save you

from occasionally having to take a bit of exercise.

Decades hence, society may look back at today's acceptance and even celebration of alcohol and shake its collective head in the same way that we now view the acceptance of tobacco smoking, or the use of opium as a tonic.

Having an evidence-based recommendation is one thing. Actually changing behaviour is quite another. Millions of British men and women admit to routinely drinking more than they should. A sizeable fraction of those still drink more than 50 units a week. And the UK experts also pointed out the (not so) sobering fact that behavioural experts "found little evidence regarding the impact of any guidelines in changing health behaviours".

Still, it is a starting point, and the scientists whose work fed into the new guidelines should be proud. Converting solid evidence into scientifically grounded policy is something that everyone can raise a glass to. And more people now have the evidence to decide for themselves what type of drink should go into it. ■

"The scientists whose work fed into the new guidelines should be proud."

A secure future

Research advances mean that the time is ripe to ratify the ban on testing nuclear weapons.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) agreement, so the timing of the latest nuclear blast from North Korea is pertinent. The country's continued testing — this is its fourth test since 2006 — puts it on a path to developing miniaturized warheads that could be placed on missiles, risking an arms race in the region and increased global instability.

North Korea is one reason why the CTBT is not yet in force. The dictatorship is one of eight nuclear-capable nations that have yet to ratify the agreement, along with China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and the United States.

Science may seem to have little leverage in the volatile mixture of global power struggles and regional stand-offs, but it has been successful before. A major reason that so many countries were willing to sign up to the treaty in 1996 was the diligent research by a group of international scientists — known as the Group of Scientific Experts — established 20 years earlier in 1976. It had drawn up a credible road map of what technologies would be needed to verify that no country could cheat on its treaty obligations by carrying out undetected tests, thus giving them a military edge on those who abided by the rules.