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Vietnam, Dietary Diseases

Vietnam: Alcoholism, an Epidemic Sweeping the Country

Vietnam is a tropical country in Southeastern Asia known for its exotic fruits and beautiful beaches. There are two sides of Vietnam: the busy city and the quiet country. In the city, there are crowded streets, tall buildings, thousands of mopeds, and tons of food vendors. Meanwhile, the countryside is filled with rice paddies and farmers who produce Vietnam's food supply. On the outside, Vietnam seems like a typical balanced country, however there is an epidemic washing through the nation: alcoholism. Alcoholism affects everyone: young or old, male or female, drinker or not. Not only does this disease attack health, family, and quality of life, it also endangers Vietnam's food security.

Vietnam is a densely populated country with over 96 million people (The World Factbook: VIETNAM) living in an area not much bigger than the state of New Mexico (The World Factbook: UNITED STATES). Even so, with a population that large, nearly 11.3% of the population falls below the poverty line (The World Factbook: VIETNAM), making it a developing country. Due to lack of sanitation, certain diseases are widespread such as Hepatitis A, bacterial diarrhea, and typhoid fever (The World Factbook: VIETNAM). On top of this, there are roughly 1.18 doctors available for every 1,000 people (The World Factbook: VIETNAM).

Regardless of these conditions, Vietnam is still home to millions of people. The Vietnamese live their day to day lives with the support of their family. Family is the core of Vietnamese life because it is very common for people to not only live with their parents, but also their extended family including uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents (Socialist). This structure is tradition because the Vietnamese family bases its main values on the practices of Confucianism which were brought from China centuries ago (Admin). These practices place heavy emphasis on respect, especially for elders and fathers. Elders are regarded with a lot of respect since they have lived longer, and therefore have more experience and knowledge. Meanwhile, the father is highly respected because Vietnam is traditionally patriarchal since the father used to be the main provider of the family. Therefore, it was very important to honor him and obey his rules. Today, most Vietnamese women have entered the workforce, but a patriarchal household still remains.

Education in Vietnam is free, but it is mandatory only through ages 6-14 (World Data). One reason why the maximum age requirement is only 14 is because farm children will often drop out early to help their parents on the farm. This situation is quite common in the countryside as agriculture plays a large part in Vietnam's economy. Another reason is due to poverty. There is no minimum age for a child to join the workforce, especially on the farm. Thus, they may drop school to help support their family. Even so, almost 94.5% of the population is literate (The World Factbook). For students who choose to stay in school and continue on to secondary education, they must take a final exam which determines the high school they will be placed in their city. This test separates students, so students who exceed greatly are put into gifted schools where they will be "encouraged by the state and society to develop their talents" (World Data).

Currently, there is a very dangerous problem in Vietnam called alcoholism. According to the Webster dictionary, alcoholism is defined as "a chronic, a progressive, potentially fatal disorder marked by excessive and usually compulsive drinking of alcohol leading to psychological and physical dependence or addiction" (Alcoholism). Alcoholism in Vietnam is worse than in other places because it is such a large

part of Vietnamese culture. Alcohol is very accessible in Vietnam as it is sold in almost every restaurant and can cost less than one dollar per can of beer (Cost).

There are two main causes of alcoholism: the culture and poverty.

The culture is a major cause of alcoholism in Vietnam. Men are traditionally and still currently viewed as strong and leader-like due to patriarchal households and one way to show off that toughness is through drinking alcohol because alcohol is associated with masculinity (Lincoln). Due to this, there is a large percent of men drinking as 25.5% of men are alcoholics compared to only 0.7% of women (Lincoln). It is expected for a man to be able to drink, regardless of his health conditions. Drinking is even encouraged from a young age and there are no laws prohibiting it because there is no age limit (Hanson). Peer pressure also plays a role in this as young people may be tempted to drink if they see their peers or family members doing so. Also, schools do not educate student about the health risks of drinking alcohol, so it is not perceived as dangerous. In addition, adults often go drinking with business partners because of the culture. They go drinking to get to know each other better in a casual way. While this would be normal, the Vietnamese often do not drink in moderation during these cases, typically drinking until they are completely intoxicated. There is a well-known saying that goes “‘không say, không về’ or ‘not drunk, not going home’” (Lincoln). In one study, almost 38.6% of men living in a southern, medium-sized city called Can Tho consumed at least five drinks on one day in the past week (Lincoln) which exemplifies unhealthy drinking behavior. Furthermore, the Vietnamese will share glasses with each other as a symbol of closeness and friendship, but that easily allows the spread of diseases such as mono, hepatitis A, or tuberculosis. When workers are pressured by their bosses, it is hard for them to refuse because of the social hierarchy that exists like patriarch hierarchy at home. Because of this, workers will be tempted to drink more and more until they are eventually drunk or pass out.

Next, poverty often causes people to look to alcohol. Since alcohol has been heavily embraced by the Vietnamese culture, people will often use it as therapy for stress. Low income jobs and unemployment cause people to be hopeless and depressed about their economic situation. People become desperate and will try to find a means of escape. Alcohol helps them do that. As more alcohol enters the system, people become more and more intoxicated which leads to memory lapses and blackouts, so they can temporarily “forget” about their predicament.

This type of behavior concerning alcohol use is very unsafe to general health, family structure, and food security of Vietnamese citizens. Alcohol affects all parts of the body including the brain, heart, liver, and pancreas. The brain is heavily affected as the alcohol blocks its communication pathways which can lead to memory loss, rapid changes in mood, and difficulty making rational decisions. This is also known as being under the influence. Then, the heart can be damaged which could lead to life-threatening diseases such as arrhythmias, high blood pressure, and stroke. Also, the liver cannot process all the alcohol in a short amount of time, so binge drinking may lead to hepatitis, fibrosis, or cirrhosis. Moreover, the pancreas will produce dangerous toxins that will lead to pancreatitis which inflames pancreas blood vessels (Alcohol's Effects). Since alcohol is extremely harmful to the body, the drinker will have a higher chance of becoming hospitalized. This can become a life-threatening situation as hospitals are very full and some families may not be able to afford healthcare, especially if they are the one-tenth below the poverty line.

Alcoholism can also affect families of the drinker either by abuse or death. Domestic violence is very common with alcohol abuse as emotions become confused due to intoxication. Mood swings are unpredictable and the drinker may act irrationally or even violently. This leads to spouses and children becoming victims of abuse and thus damages their family relationships. Children become confused as to why their parent may be hurting them and it breaks down the child's trust. If this happens frequently, the child will become more distant and develop feelings of sadness or anger as a reaction. This further puts

the child at risk as children that are brought up in an alcoholic family are four times as likely to abuse it in the future (What Are). In addition, alcoholism affects families if the drinker (typically the father) dies. Almost 60.4% of male crash victims were intoxicated past the legal alcohol consumption limit (Lincoln) which means drunk driving accounts for a significant amount of accidents. Death of a father can be extremely traumatic for the mother and children. On top of that, if the father was the main provider, his death could put his family at further risk for poverty.

These devastating effects of alcoholism endanger the food security of the people as families are unable to pay for food. A lot of the money worked for goes to the father's drinking problems, leaving the rest of the family without food. One story exemplifies this, "Nhi is one of the unlucky women who have married men who are lazy workers and drink or gamble the family's money away... Whenever there are conflicts in the family, the husband has the power, no matter what wife says, he still only scolds her, beats her..." (Lincoln). This scenario is not uncommon as the quote generalizes Nhi as one of the unfortunate to fall into that situation. With an unstable source of income, food is not guaranteed at meals. This deprives families of the nutrients they need, often making them underweight and at risk to many diseases because of their weakened immune systems. If they are sick, they cannot work for food. Children can be forced to work instead of studying in school which hinders their opportunities for the future.

Not only does alcoholism affect people on a small, domestic scale, its destruction has a global impact. Roughly 3.3 million deaths are caused by the misuse of alcohol which accounts for 5.9% of deaths worldwide (Alcohol World Health). This means millions of families have been devastated from losing a loved one due to alcohol. Also, alcoholism causes employees to miss days at work, lowering the overall productivity at a workplace. People who are dependent on alcohol are more likely to miss work more than their non-alcoholic counterparts. While this seems miniscule, 8-14 million work days are missed annually due to alcohol use (Global Status).

Due to the profitability of the alcohol industry, major companies try to maintain or even expand their influences on the alcohol industry. An example is, "Alcohol advertising and promotion is rapidly expanding throughout the world and is increasingly sophisticated and carefully targeted, including to youth. It is aimed to attract, influence, and recruit new generations of potential drinkers" (Alcohol on Health and Society). To most companies, the economical benefits of the product is more important than the well being of the consumers. These advertisements are improved with the aim to create more revenue for the company. Overall, the alcohol industry had made \$1,344 billion in 2015 and is estimated to grow as in 2022 it is expected to make \$1,594 billion (Allied Market Research). Since money is such a large factor in the industry, it is more difficult to convince businesses to decrease their harmful alcohol production.

Even with these conditions, it is possible to improve conditions and decrease alcoholism. Alcoholism is not easily solved, so it requires the cooperation of everyone from every level. First, reform can start small, starting with children. People tend to place importance on changing adults and people who are drinkers, but children matter too. Schools can help this by teaching children about the dangers of alcohol in school. This type of education is not currently provided. Children do not get educated about the use of alcohol and its effects. Because of this, children are more likely to drink if a family member does. Schools should provide education about alcohol to encourage children not to drink. By learning about the dangers of alcohol such as disease and death, it will help discourage children from drinking or at least teach them to drink in moderation as an adult. In the United States, a program called DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) teaches students K-12 skills on how to avoid drugs and alcohol and how to resist it. Since this program is implemented in all 50 states and in over 300,000 schools, the program is seen as how schools can help contribute to decreasing alcoholism, especially with children (Alcohol Education).

Next, the community can help by making rehabilitation meetings available. These places would contain support groups, which help motivate people to break their addiction. If a group of people with similar problems come together wanting to improve themselves, they can keep each other accountable. The United States has a group called Alcoholics Anonymous where alcoholics can gather with the goal of curing their addiction. AA has a 12-step program which involves “accepting powerlessness over alcohol, recognizing that one cannot do it alone, realizing how one’s behavior affected and affects others, treating other people better, finding meaning in life, and relinquishing one’s negative self-focus by helping others”. Studies have shown 70% of those that attend this group for at least 27 weeks were successfully abstinent from alcohol for the next 16 years (Kaskutas). Funding for AA comes from its members as they do not want any outside source from changing their beliefs. They state, “Any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise” (Contributions). The majority of the funds is used to pay rent for their facilities. To avoid this issue, meetings should be held in free, public spaces such as churches, temples, parks, and so forth.

Then, even larger than the community are the alcohol companies. They can put warning signs on alcoholic beverages warning users about the health risks associated with alcoholism and how it can impact them as a family member. This idea was based on how the United States places warnings on cigarette boxes to discourage the use of smoking. Companies may be unwilling, but the Vietnamese government could demand this regulation. After all, the healthy of the citizens should be prioritized over commercial profit.

In addition, the government can pass a law regarding the age limit of drinking and buying alcohol. There is currently no age limit (Hanson), so children can go to stores and buy alcohol and say they’re buying it for their “parents”. This is very risky as children do not need proof of identification giving them full access to alcohol. Moreover, heavier fines should be put in place to further discourage drunk driving. The police should help enforce these rules and drunk driving should be strictly prohibited. Mopeds are the main mode of transportation, and alcohol impairs the body’s sense of balance, making it more difficult to control. There are many people who are victims of drunk drivers. Some cases lead to severe injury or death.

Another solution may be rehabilitation centers, however in Vietnam, rehabilitation centers are often detention centers, imprisoning alcoholics. They are often associated with a negative connotation. In one instance, hundreds of drug addicts had attempted to escape from a detention center due to its horrible conditions. It was described as, “Long hours at menial jobs for below-market wages... Those who fail to meet work quotas are beaten. Patients who violate center rules can be locked in solitary confinement” (Amon). These centers are clearly unregulated by the government and intrude on basic human rights. These centers should serve to help cure addictions rather than punish people. Rehabilitation centers are often violent and unappealing to people who may seek help. Even so, rehabilitation centers could be reformed to help citizens. They should hire professionals such as psychologists and doctors who understand the mental and physical impacts of alcoholism and different methods that could help patients. These centers should be similar to hospitals in the United States, but with focused attention on helping alcoholics overcome their addiction. To ensure these centers will be non-violent and helpful, yearly inspections should be put in place either by the government or another nation to ensure global regulations are put in place.

In conclusion, alcoholism is a very prominent disease that affects everyone, from drinkers to family members to even just passerbys, vulnerable to drunk driving. While the culture and tradition of drinking is unlikely to change, schools, communities, and the government can work together to raise awareness about alcohol and apply stricter rules to reduce the causes and impacts of alcoholism.

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