



that nurses were taking on an increasingly clinical role with no real career pathing or decent remuneration.

'With this training we can start addressing our human resource problems by empowering nurses to respond appropriately,' she said.

Dr Ronald Chapman, Executive Manager, Health Support in the Free State health department, said the probability of nurses diagnostically picking up what doctors usually did proved to be very high when using the guidelines.

### **HIV driving Free State's TB**

The Free State has South Africa's highest HIV positivity in TB patients (70%) and according to the nationwide household survey led by Dr Olive Shisana (now

chief executive of the HSRC), the highest HIV incidence as well.

Said Chapman, 'We're on an exponential curve and the earlier we can pick them up the quicker we can treat them'.

With the HIV / AIDS pandemic the new TB patient count in the Free State had risen from 9 000 annually 8 years ago to 19 500 per annum last year.

Chapman said doctors in his province were clamouring for the guidelines, some even offering to buy them (they are free).

The PALSa plus guidelines had been so successful in his province that they would be adapted for sexually transmitted diseases, prevention of mother-to-child transmission and

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voluntary counselling and testing by early next year.

At 667 TB sufferers per 100 000 people, the Free State has the fourth highest provincial TB prevalence in the country. The Western Cape has the highest (988 per 100 000), followed by KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape.

**Chris Bateman**

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## THE DANGERS OF GOING WITHOUT

Unless there are contraindications, going without an alcoholic drink for more than 24 hours is actually dangerous to your health.

This seemingly startling claim was made to *Izindaba* by Professor Curtis Ellison, head of the Department of Preventive Medicine and Epidemiology at the Boston University's School of Medicine and co-author of the famous *French Paradox*.

A keynote speaker at the International Congress on Health and Wine held at Spier near Stellenbosch in mid-September, Ellison said two-thirds of the health benefits of regular moderate drinking lay in the alcohol, 'not necessarily red wine'.

'If you don't like wine, have a beer and you'll get most of the protection against heart disease,' he added.

Ellison said that since CBS television in the USA screened his and Canadian colleague Dr Serge Renaud's findings on the 'French paradox' in 1991 (with an update 4 years later), much of the

ethical and medical stigma around reporting research findings on alcohol had disappeared. 'It's been 14 years and the data doesn't support any alcohol abuse as a result of our findings being publicised,' he added.

CBS's '60 Minutes' reported the inconsistency in the lifestyles and rates of heart disease among people in France, in spite of a diet of rich foods – including more butter, cheeses, eggs and sauces, an estimated 15% of their daily calories obtained from saturated fats, and less exercise. Yet the rate of heart disease for French people is only 40% of that of Americans.

Renaud and Ellison explained the 'paradox', or the incompatibility of a diet rich in fatty foods and a decreased

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risk of heart disease, by the tendency for people in France to drink red wine regularly with their meals – and an apparent factor in red wine that protects against heart disease.

### **More than just 'feeling good'**

Ellison told *Izindaba* that the publicity generated by '60 Minutes' (30 million viewers) 'got people thinking for the first time that there might be something good other than just feeling good, to red wine'. The programme had opened the floodgates on similar research (8 000 studies worldwide since).

'I think we're going in the right direction. We're not saying you should drink more, but a little, more often,' he stressed. Consumption of one or two glasses of wine daily (total of 150 - 170 ml), preferably red, accompanied by a Mediterranean-type meal, yielded the greatest health benefits. Wine, especially red, was shown to have marginally additional protective effects than other alcohol.



The benefits extended beyond cardiovascular diseases to obesity, diabetes (30% lower risk) and even dementia, which Ellison said he found 'the most exciting'.

This was because all reputable studies had shown that moderate drinkers were less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and dementia and they performed better than abstainers on tests of memory and cognitive functioning.

The mechanisms for such protection were unknown, but were believed to relate to prevention of atherosclerosis in small cerebral blood vessels or to the reduction in inflammatory changes within the brain.

On obesity, the argument that the 140 calories per glass of wine meant it was best avoided was blown out of the water by research. It showed that non-drinkers and heavy drinkers were the fattest, followed by abstainers, with moderate drinkers the leanest.

Even when this was adjusted for exercise and not-smoking, the results remained the same.

### Bottom line

The 'bottom line' however remained the net effects of alcohol on total mortality, where the biggest factor was how much one drank. Alcoholics did not live as long as abstainers but moderate drinkers lived longer than abstainers. A study of almost one million Americans by the American Cancer Society showed the risk of dying of any cause was related to the reported intake of alcohol of participants.

For both men and women, the risk was 21% lower for moderate drinkers (reporting 1 - 2 drinks per day) than for abstainers. Data from the Copenhagen Heart Study and others around the world yielded similar results. Deaths in the Copenhagen study 'attributable' to excessive alcohol consumption were considerably fewer than deaths attributable to *not* drinking, with the

excessive deaths in abstainers being primarily from their increased risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Ellison, who runs an institute that conducts surveillance on similar research worldwide, said work published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2001/2002) defined a 'healthy lifestyle' for preventing diabetes and heart disease as having five main components. Research respondents who met all five had more than 70% fewer myocardial infarctions and more than 90% fewer cases of diabetes.



*Professor Curtis Ellison, head of the Department of Preventive Medicine and Epidemiology at the Boston University's School of Medicine and co-author of the famous French Paradox.*

*Picture: Chris Bateman*

The five components were avoiding obesity (maintaining a body mass index of less than 25), consuming a healthy diet high in fibre and unsaturated fat and low in trans fat and glycaemic load (i.e. a Mediterranean-type diet), engaging in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least half an hour per day, avoiding smoking and

consuming half to two typical drinks of an alcoholic beverage per day.

'There is no question that moderate drinkers tend to have much less coronary heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, and probably less obesity and dementia – and they live longer. I'm convinced that the additional benefits from the polyphenols and other substances in wine, as well as its tendency to be consumed regularly, with meals and in moderation, make it the ideal beverage for health,' he said.

### Hear no 'evil'

While there could not be a general recommendation for everybody to drink, it was unethical to withhold from the public scientifically sound and balanced advice on drinking and health, he stressed.

Delivering the opening address at the congress, Professor Lionel Opie, emeritus Professor of Internal Medicine and Director of the Hatter Institute for Heart Research at the University of Cape Town, said a large number of short-term experiments on humans and animals showed wine to have vascular protective effects.

A 'shot of alcohol' just before a heart attack saved rats from dying while moderate doses of red wine given to pigs lessened clots in their coronary arteries.

Opie said a moderate intake of alcohol 3 - 4 days a week correlated with changes in HDL, fibrinogens and HbA<sub>1c</sub> (a glucose intolerance marker). In theory red wine was better than white, 'but we'll never really know in the absence of a prospective randomised study which could hardly be blinded and which would be very expensive,' he added.

Ellison said he could not define moderation for everyone. 'My usual answer is don't talk to me, talk to your spouse!' he said.

### Chris Bateman