

A new AMPHORA: an introduction to the project Alcohol Measures for Public Health Research Alliance

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ABSTRACT

The AMPHORA Project is a 4 years project funded by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission which aims to contribute with new evidence on scarcely explored or unexplored areas of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in Europe. In this introductory article we describe the background of the Project and its main features. The research areas covered by AMPHORA are wide and diverse. Some of the most relevant are: an update on European epidemiological data; the definition of standard common indicators of alcohol consumption and harm; the measurement of the strength of alcohol policies; the study of contextual determinants of alcohol consumption, the analysis of the impact of marketing on youth; the availability of treatments at a European level; and two areas of harm reduction (contamination of illegal or surrogate alcohols and the reduction of harm in drinking venues).

Keywords Alcohol policy, AMPHORA, Europe.

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Amphoras are ceramic vases that were used on the Syrian coast from the 15th century BC. They spread around the Mediterranean, being used as the principal means for transporting and storing different commodities until about the 7th century, when wooden and skin containers seem to have replaced them [1].

Amphoras were used all over Europe to contain wine and other commodities, and the Alcohol Measures for Public Health Research Alliance (AMPHORA) project can be viewed as using public health science to contain (and to reduce) the harm caused by alcohol in Europe. Needless to say, this is a real European need, because Europe is the world's top producer of alcoholic beverages and the leading world region in terms of per capita alcohol consumption. Seventy-four per cent of Europeans aged 15 years or older drink alcohol, and 15% of them (58 million people) exceed hazardous drinking limits (40 grams of alcohol per day in men; 20 grams in women). It has been estimated that 23 million European citizens (5% of men, 1% of women) are dependent on alcohol in any one year [2]. Alcohol-attributable deaths in Europe were estimated to be 195,000 people in 2004. The total tangible cost of alcohol to European Union (EU) society in 2003 was estimated to be €125 billion (€79–€220 billion), equivalent to 1.3% gross domestic

product (GDP); and the intangible costs for the same year were estimated to be €270 billion (€150–€760 billion) [3].

The AMPHORA project incorporates more than 50 scientists from over 30 research institutions from many EU member states with expertise in multiple disciplines and a wide range of techniques. AMPHORA stands for 'Alcohol Measures for Public Health Research Alliance' and this Alliance has been built step by step in the last two decades through scientific collaboration that has been articulated in various research projects. Among them it is worth to mention the Phases III and IV of the WHO Collaborative Project on Alcohol and Primary Health Care [4], and the PHEPA Project [5]. One of the strengths of the AMPHORA project is its multi-disciplinarity. Alcohol-related problems are multi-faceted and must be studied from complementary disciplines: economy, health, sociology, marketing, history, etc. AMPHORA Project has been funded by the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission, which for the first time in its history included public health alcohol research as one of its topics in the 2008 call for proposals. The fact that the European Commission has added alcohol as a public health topic for research at the highest European level is certainly good news for the field: recognition of both the

relevance of the problem and the important scientific contributions produced in the last decades.

This supplement to *Addiction* presents an updated description of what we know and what we aim to investigate in the different work packages of the project (<http://www.amphoraproject.net> Accessed: 30 December 2010. Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/5vMS9J6JL>). It starts with three papers devoted to set the scene: the first focuses on the relevance and difficulties of successfully disseminating science in order to promote efficient alcohol policies [6]; the second shows the epidemiological relevance of alcohol to Europe [7]. The third is a core paper for the project, as it defines the standard common indicators of alcohol consumption and attributable harm [8] to be used in the different studies of the project.

Alcohol policy is the focus of the AMPHORA project, and that is why there is a group of studies that focus on the measurement of alcohol policies [9] and on the impact of infrastructures on alcohol policies [10]. The AMPHORA project also review experiences learnt by natural experiments [11], which have been particularly abundant in recent years.

However, one of the most intriguing and exciting aspects of alcohol in Europe is how the efficacy of alcohol policies is influenced by other factors. The AMPHORA project is also devoted to this topic, focusing on the contextual determinants [12] of alcohol consumption and addressing the influence of marketing on young people both qualitatively [13] and quantitatively, including a longitudinal perspective [14].

These lines of work deal with the area of treatment and harm reduction. The availability of treatments for alcohol dependence and the use of brief interventions in health-care settings seem less than adequate in most of the European countries, and to assess the gap between need and treatment is the aim of one of the studies [15]. Harm reduction is considered in two different areas: the reduction of harm in drinking venues [16] through the identification of environmental factors that may contribute to it, and a study on the contamination of illegal and surrogate alcohol consumed in Europe [17].

There are two areas of research the project has avoided: drink-driving and education. In both areas, we think the evidence is conclusive enough [18,19] (although in different directions). Also, as research budgets are always limited, it seemed more reasonable to allocate resources to areas where European research was scarce, less conclusive and more needed.

The AMPHORA project aims to advance the state of the art in European alcohol policy research and to enhance cooperation among diverse European researchers. This supplement to *Addiction* aims to share the project with interested researchers right from its beginning. In

Roman times, amphora were brought to Rome from all over the ancient world and, once emptied, they were piled up in what today is known as Monte Testaccio, a hill 35 m tall and more than 1 km in circumference [20]. We hope our AMPHORA project will contribute to the Monte Testaccio of public health alcohol policies.

Declarations of interest

None.

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