



**Alcohol and Health Policy Seminar  
Tuesday 21 June 2016, London.**

**Abstracts**

**Introduction:** This year we have seen new guidelines for alcohol consumption and publication of the Public Health England strategic plan for improving outcomes over the next four years. But there is still a call for improving the evidence on alcohol and its harms. In this seminar, we present four papers which add to the evidence in two ways - by presenting original research on drinking behaviour over the lifecourse and by challenging the commonly held belief that some alcohol is good for you. The first presentation focuses on drinking by young people just entering adolescence. This is followed by a talk about drinking across the life course from later adolescence to old age. The third presentation asks whether positive associations between moderate drinking and better health in later life are biased if we don't account for drinking behaviour earlier in life. Finally, the fourth talk also addresses bias by demonstrating that the cognitive benefits of light drinking disappear when robust statistical methods are used.

**Seminar Co-ordinator:** Amanda Sacker, Professor of Lifecourse Studies, UCL and ICLS Director

**Presentation 1:** Drinking behaviours at the start of adolescence – findings from the Millennium Cohort Study.

**Abstract:** Heavy alcohol consumption in youth is linked to a range of consequences including educational failure, other risky behaviours and premature death. Drinking in the late teenage years has been widely studied, but relatively little is known about the factors that influence drinking behaviours at the start of adolescence. Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study on over 10, 000 11 year olds in which we look at individual and family factors associated with drinking behaviours will be presented.

**Speaker:** Yvonne Kelly is Professor of Lifecourse Epidemiology at UCL and Associate Director of ICLS. She has worked in the field of child health and development for over 20 years.

## **Presentation 2:** Taking a life course perspective – does previous drinking matter?

**Abstract:** Alcohol consumption guidelines are informed by evidence from large population based cohort studies. In these studies, exposure to alcohol is typically measured just once among participants at baseline and health outcomes are tracked during the follow up period. It is assumed that the initial consumption level is an accurate measure of exposure throughout the study period (which may be several decades). However, individuals change their consumption levels over time and research on the health consequences of alcohol needs to consider the effects of previous drinking. Findings will be presented from multiple cohort studies with trajectories of alcohol consumption over the life course, with data spanning from adolescence to very old age. How different trajectories of drinking are associated with risk of developing several chronic diseases will be illustrated.

**Speaker:** Annie Britton is a Reader in Epidemiology at UCL. She has studied the health outcomes associated with alcohol consumption for nearly 20 years

## **Presentation 3:** Is moderate drinking beneficial for health? The case of health-selection bias among non-drinkers

**Abstract:** There's a longstanding belief that alcohol in moderation is beneficial for health, but what gives rise to such claims? Evidence will be presented that demonstrate that 'non-drinkers' are not like the average person in terms of health from adolescence to middle-age. The better health outcomes of moderate drinkers compared to non-drinkers in later life, often attributed to a 'protective effect of moderate alcohol consumption', may just be a result of health selection effects into non-drinking.

**Speaker:** Linda Ng Fat is a post-doctoral researcher working on the Health Survey for England, Health and Social Surveys Research Group, UCL. She completed her PhD which forms the bases of her presentation in 2014, from the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, UCL

## **Presentation 4:** Alcohol consumption and cognitive function: a causal analysis.

**Abstract:** It is suggested that light-to-moderate drinking reduces the risk of all forms of dementia and is associated with higher cognition test scores. However, studies that examine this question are susceptible to 'reverse causality', that is, ill-health such as impaired cognition might stop people drinking or reduce their intake. In this case, people who don't drink would appear to have lower cognitive scores than current drinkers. Observational studies might also be subject to 'confounding', that is an unmeasured factor might be common to moderate drinking and better cognition to give the impression of an association where no causal association exists.

Recently methods have been developed that overcome some of these problems by using genetic markers related to alcohol intake. I will demonstrate that while observational results do indeed suggest that more alcohol intake is associated with better cognitive function, this is not found when genetic markers are used to examine this relationship.

**Speaker:** Meena Kumari, ICLS and Essex University, is a Professor of biological and social epidemiology and has examined questions related to the social-biological transition using a wide variety of methodologies for nearly twenty years.