

Alcoholism:

CH₃CH₂OH. Ethanol. Ethyl Alcohol. This substance, derived from the fermenting of fruit or grain sugars, has been known since ancient times. Problems associated with alcohol have been around just about as long.

Today, alcohol is part of the cultural milieu of Western society. In many European cultures, wine is an integral part of the family meal. In North America, alcohol is frequently associated with "the good life" in the media; many social events are centred around alcohol.

Dr. F.B. Cookson, Director of University Health Services, describes alcohol as an anesthetic. "It's a liquid tranquilizer," he said. "In small doses it's an excellent relaxant."

These qualities make alcohol the most widely used recreational drug. The relaxing properties are used to break down social barriers in an acceptable way. However, in excessive quantities it is a poison.

"In small doses it's an excellent relaxant."

Prolonged abuse of alcohol can lead to various problems, said Dr. Cookson, who described the potential effects as "devastating". Chronic abuse can lead to liver problems, ulcers, and nervous system damage. A large enough single dose can be fatal. And it's addictive. "It's a dangerous drug" says Cookson.

In small doses, alcohol has few harmful effects, and is widely used as a social lubricant. Its use had traditionally been a province of the adult. Most jurisdictions have a minimum age for drinking. In Alberta, it's 18. In the rest of North America it ranges from 18 to 21. This means that most, if not all, university students are old enough to drink. And most of them do. A 1983 study by the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario reported that only about

five per cent of university students were abstainers; almost three-fourths of those surveyed said they had a drink at least once a week.

At the University of Alberta, alcohol is big business. There are several places licenced to sell alcoholic beverages on campus.

One of these places, Room At The Top (RATT), had approximately \$300,000 in sales in the 1985-86 fiscal year, according to SU VP Internal

"A chronic alcoholic would have difficulty surviving on campus."

Barb Higgin. Dewey's in HUB Mall, also an SU enterprise, has sales figures of \$430,000 for the same period. Dewey's also sells meals, which are included in the total sales. However, said Higgin, "most of RATT is booze."

Social use is probably the biggest reason that students, and people in general, drink. The physical and psychological effects are a major factor: to relax, to relieve anxiety, to loosen up. In social settings a person feels less insecure after having had a drink or two.

Peer pressure is another factor. With many social events centered around alcohol (and places where it is consumed in large quantities), non-drinkers may feel like outsiders.

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Most university students, even those who drink heavily, eventually become average drinkers. Students are drinking, but Higgin does not believe that it is a problem which is out of control.

Dr. Cookson believes that although some students have alcohol problems, it tends to be overstated.

"Students tend to consume a little more than they do later in life," he said, "but there's not as much excess as some like to believe." He added that the problem was much greater in the late 1960s and early 70s. "Today there is greater use, but less abuse."

The Council on Student Services' Advisory Committee on Alcohol Awareness separates alcohol use into four categories, (social use, misuse, abuse, addicted).

"Social Use" is defined as "use of alcohol to highlight an already pleasurable occasion", and has no effects on a person's lifestyle. "Misuse" refers to problems caused by occasional excessive consumption of alcohol. "Use" becomes 'abuse' when problems occur on a regular basis as a result of drinking. At this stage though, the individual is still able to change their pattern of drinking. When the control is lost, the person is "addicted". At this

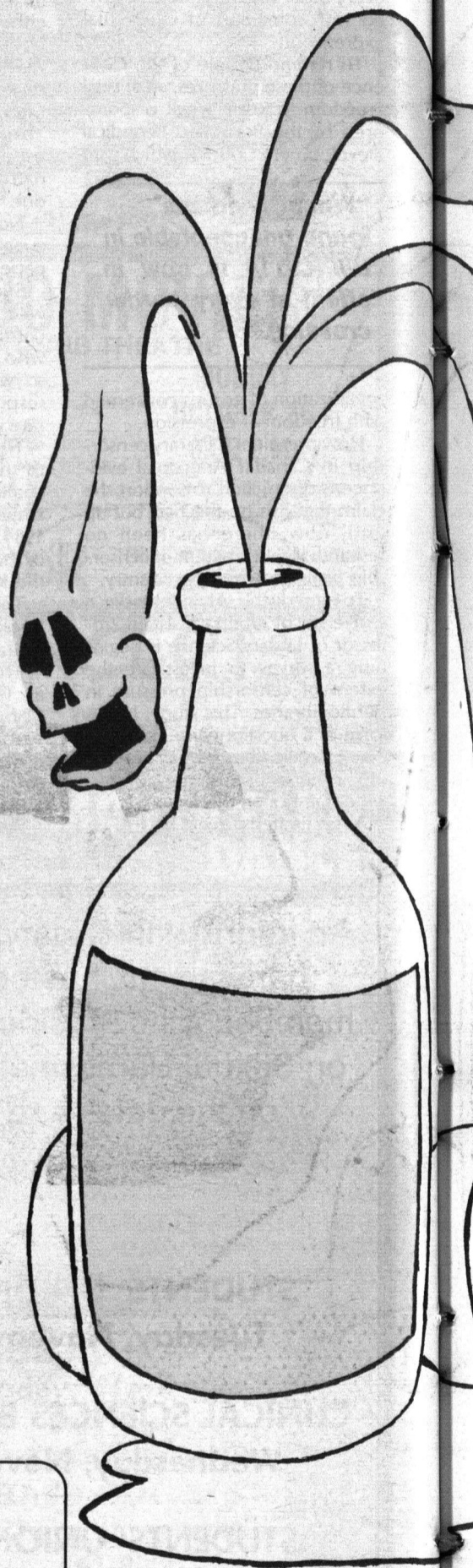
"Today there is greater use, but less abuse."

stage, a drink is necessary to cope with everyday existence.

The most common scenario of dependence on alcohol starts with social use and progresses through misuse and abuse to addiction. The tranquilizing, relaxing effects of alcohol becomes a way of alleviating stress and distress. A vicious circle develops when a person who uses alcohol as a stress remedy discovers that their problems only disappear while under the influence of alcohol. Repeated escapes into the bottle become necessary to simply cope with everyday life.

The above is a worst-case scenario, and most people don't go that far. Most, but not all. Some people do get caught in the pattern of abuse. Students, like anyone else, are susceptible.

Dr. Cookson believes that there are very few students who have abuse and addiction problems.



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