The traditional public health perspective on alcohol and noncommunicable diseases is indicted in a new report from the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP).

"Alcohol misuse and global health: The case for an inclusive approach to harmful drinking" discredits the traditional public health perspective that focuses on a narrow group of stakeholders and ignores individual factors and social norms.

"Unfortunately, some widely-held public policy perspectives on reducing harmful drinking are based on questionable and misleading data," said ICAP President Marcus Grant. "This report draws on a wide pool of research to clarify misconceptions and propose a more effective model that involves a broader group of stakeholders and resources, including alcohol producers."

In the past decade, there is greater recognition of the impact of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in both developed and developing countries. Harmful alcohol consumption is a contributing lifestyle factor for several of the most widespread and harmful of these diseases, with alcohol misuse accounting for four percent of global disease burden.

The report notes that a reduction in heavy-drinking patterns will have a more significant impact on public health than limiting alcohol's physical and economic availability. Unlike tobacco use, which is harmful at any level, light to moderate drinking can have healthful benefits for some groups. There is little to be gained from stigmatizing what is, for many people, a normal behavior.

The WHO Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol recognizes this distinction, and that including a wider array of stakeholders than historically have been engaged contributes to a more effective public health response. In an era of shrinking economies, the fight against such a critical public health issue cannot afford to exclude key influencers, such as alcohol producers, or the unique resources they can provide.

The focus of the public health community, policymakers, non-governmental organizations and yes, even producers, should be on mitigating the risk of unhealthy consumption patterns, rather than eliminating consumption altogether.

Source: The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP; www.icap.org), a not-for-profit organization supported by major international producers of beverage alcohol.

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