SOME FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL: WHAT IT DOES AND HOW IT DOES IT

Richard Zylman

There are few subjects discussed more universally than the use of beverage alcohol. It is cause for social, emotional, moral, political, medical and economic concern in all segments of society and is the subject of perpetual debate in legislative bodies at all levels of government. Beverage alcohol is spoken of with pleasure, anticipation, relish, delight, satisfaction and gusto, and with disdain, dislike, repugnance and abhorrence, depending on one's point of view. It is a constant subject of discussion in barroom, billet, battlefield, chapel, church, school, business and government. There is probably no other subject about which people talk with greater enthusiasm, emotion, conviction, authority—and gross lack of knowledge, than alcohol.

Everybody talks about what they perceive to be or imagine to be the affects of alcohol, but few people have more than a vague notion as to how alcohol works. In the following paragraphs an attempt is made to bring into perspective some of the more practical aspects of what alcohol does to the body and what the body does to alcohol. It should be noted that this is not intended to be a comprehensive, sophisticated dissertation on the physiology and toxicology of alcohol, but rather, a brief discussion of those aspects of alcohol use that may be of value to those who imbibe.

WHAT DO WE DRINK?

First, it should be recognized that, although there are many different kinds of alcohol, the alcohol we drink, whether it be in beer, wine or distilled spirits, is all the same; it is ethyl alcohol which we will hereafter refer to simply as alcohol.

Before going on we should become aware that ethyl alcohol is the only alcohol consumed by humans because it is the only alcohol the human body can metabolize or breakdown and dispose of. The liver has the capability to chemically break down ethyl alcohol into other substances and ultimately into carbon dioxide and water in which form it leaves the body. Other alcohols have a different chemical makeup that

Richard Zylman was formerly an Associate Research Professor at the Center of Alcohol Studies, Rutgers University. He has more than 20 years experience in traffic law enforcement, police training, and alcohol-traffic safety research and has published widely in all of those fields. Mr. Zylman often serves as an expert witness in court cases involving alcohol abuse.