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Letters

Data on drinking

In your report of the alcoholism study conducted by John E. Helzer et al. ("None for the road," SN: 7/13/85, p. 25), you failed to note that 12 percent of the alcoholics in the follow-up sample, while exceeding their criteria for moderation, continued to drink but *not* to have any alcohol-related problems. Combining this group with the 1.6 percent classified as moderate drinkers, and with the 4.6 percent who were "primarily abstinent" but did drink occasionally and moderately, results in a total of 18 percent who were drinking but not experiencing alcohol-related problems.

This is identical to the four-year follow-up Rand report, which found 18 percent of its sample to be nonproblem drinkers. Consequently, there does not appear to be anything new in this report except in the way in which the data have

This Week

- 100 FDA to Ban Sulfites From Fresh Produce
- 100 Shaking up a protein's tangled world
- 101 Plant toxins: A double-edged sword
- 101 Counting falling starfish in California
- 102 Right-handers' reduced brain connection
- 102 Breaking the rules in crystallography
- 103 Sodium found in Mercury's atmosphere
- 103 Short-stature treatment reevaluated
- 104 Water cleanup not so clear
- 104 Chemical study zeros in on deep magma
- 104 Ohio radiotelescope saved

Research Notes

- 105 Earth Sciences
- 105 Physical Sciences

Articles

- 106 Kids and the Bomb: Apocalyptic Anxieties?

Cover: Political opinions about nuclear policy, such as that of this student attending a rally for a nuclear freeze, are often directly expressed and observed. But surveys that attempt to tap teenagers' inner concerns and fears about the nuclear arms race are open to varying scientific interpretations. (Photograph: John Foraste/Brown Univ.)



- 108 Picture Programs

Departments

- 99 Letters
- 111 Books

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been interpreted.

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Professionals in the addictions treatment field have found empirically that no alcoholic or drug addict can safely return to the use of alcohol or drugs. But items such as "None for the road" fuel the desperate hopes of drinking/denying alcoholics that they will be part of the tiny minority of alcoholics who, those researchers claim, can return to "controlled drinking." If alcoholics try this, they only experience the misery of ongoing destructive drinking.

The breakdown in the researchers' method is that follow-up data on how an alcoholic is faring

in recovery is always compromised by the denial and hiding of problems by both the alcoholic who still drinks and those who are close to him or her. This is especially true for female alcoholics, for whom the stigma of the disease is even worse than it is for men. It is not surprising that the researchers found a supposedly rosier picture for return to "controlled drinking" by female alcoholics—their higher denial obscured the true picture even more than for the males.

Please consider attaching warnings about research limitations on any future reports about provocative health and social issues.

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Letters continued on p. 109

AUGUST 17, 1985

99