

# Alarm at growing addiction problems among professionals

Urgent action needed to tackle problems suffered by doctors, lawyers and people in other high-profile jobs, say healthcare experts

**Tracy McVeigh**

The Observer, Saturday 12 November 2011

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Doctors are three times more likely to develop cirrhosis of the liver than the general population. Photograph: joefoxphoto / Alamy/Alamy

Experts are calling for urgent action to tackle the "significant challenge" of rising levels of alcoholism and substance abuse among professionals including [doctors](#), [dentists](#) and lawyers.

At the first international conference of its kind, in Ireland this weekend, there were calls for the UK government to help the silent mass of professionals who were "functioning alcoholics".

Rory O'Connor, the UK co-ordinator of health support programmes for dentists and veterinary surgeons, told the *Observer* that Britain was turning a blind eye to a huge problem. He said: "There are serious issues regarding health professionals accessing appropriate help for [mental health](#) issues and there are serious issues in the treatment that is out there for them."

Research suggests 15-24% of lawyers will suffer from alcoholism during their careers, while the British Medical Association estimates that one in 15 healthcare professionals will develop an addiction problem. Doctors are three times more likely to develop cirrhosis of the liver than the general population.

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One indicator of the growing problem is the rise in the popularity of "rehab tourism". Reports from private healthcare companies indicate a growing number of "mental health tourists" – professionals seeking treatment abroad.

O'Connor said: "That is hardly surprising, as they can afford it. These are people functioning with varying degrees and levels of impairment and not likely to seek help among their peers. They can't go to the hospital down the road where everyone will know them, can they? It's one reason why they are such a hard-to-reach group.

"If you ask the man in the street what an alcoholic is, they'll generally say a down and out, but 96% of people with addictions actually function quite well most of the time. They are captains of industry, medical directors, vets, dentists... and we need to tackle it and to look at the acceptance that has been going on in their regulatory bodies."

He said the behavioural health conference, held at Toranfield House addiction centre in County Wicklow, was the first step in sending out a strong message that addiction needed to be tackled in the way smoking had been. "From an economic perspective, ignoring this issue is not a very wise thing to do, and from a public safety aspect it's not wise to have people out there who are practising while impaired through addiction."

O'Connor has established self-help support groups for UK health professionals including doctors, dentists, vets and pharmacists. "Health professionals are generally not good at seeking help for themselves, mainly because they see it very much as their role to help others. There is also immense shame, a stigma still attached to a perceived weakness like addiction."

Going abroad for help was one way to avoid that stigma, said Keith Pollard, the managing director of Intuition Communication, which runs the information website [treatmentabroad.com](http://treatmentabroad.com). He said that while other types of medical tourism were waning in the recession, demand for rehabilitation clinics abroad was on the rise.

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"That area of the market is doing very well. The driver is a combination of less chance of your treatment becoming public knowledge and putting a distance between [you and] the drinking culture to aid your rehab," he said.

Alastair Mordey, the programme director of the Cabin, a substance abuse clinic in Chiang Mai, Thailand, said demand for treatment programmes for doctors was growing at twice the rate as that for other occupations.

Mordey said the numbers were shocking. "The picture is disturbing. We are seeing a lot of professionals coming in, particularly from London. In Britain absolutely there is a silent mass of professionals who are functioning, in terms of that they haven't lost everything, but they are in workplaces where you really wouldn't want them to be. Not only those who are responsible for health and human lives, but also bankers who are responsible for our economy." He said that while it was not a conscious policy to tolerate addictions of professionals, many firms did.

"In healthcare, doctors and nurses are famous for a riotous social life. But in public health terms I don't see why that can't be tackled. Binge drinking could be brought down in the same way the UK tackled smoking."

He said that rehab could be more difficult for better-educated people who found it harder to let themselves be helped by their peers. "Those professionals have the most to lose. In the UK and other countries like Australia and the US there is that Anglo-Saxon mentality – a work hard, play hard culture."

Ed, 34, a dentist who sought help at the Cabin, said his problems began as a medical student. "On Fridays everyone would be off down the pub. That drinking culture makes it so much easier to get into alcoholism once the stress of working life starts to take effect.

"I didn't seek help myself until my wife threatened to pack her bags and go. Without a doubt it was very hard to seek help."



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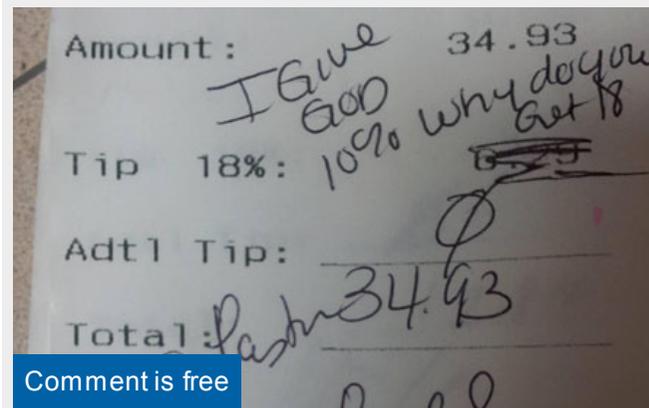
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Tips are not optional, they are how waiters get paid in America



**mactheanti**

13 November 2011 12:20am

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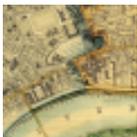
**bouncyCzech**

13 November 2011 12:59am

88

Not only those who are responsible for health and human lives, but also bankers who are responsible for our economy."

I think bankers are more of a danger when they 'know' exactly what they are doing.



**Wickywickyman**

13 November 2011 1:02am

55

'Ed, 34, a dentist who sought help at the Cabin, said his problems began as a medical student. "On Fridays everyone would be off down the pub. That drinking culture makes it so much easier to get into alcoholism once the stress of working life starts to take effect.'

Rather tiresome to suggest that this sort of thing is confined to medics.



**rollingstone33**

13 November 2011 1:06am

196

ahhhh what a shame the highly paid people like a little drinkie and the city banks like to shite cash away on coke. these high-earners

my heart bleeds.



**FrederickL**

13 November 2011 1:09am

169

I remember many years ago watching Jasper Carrott's TV show. He said to the audience that he had recently read a survey which claimed that smoking rates amongst doctors were significantly lower than in the population in general. He paused for a second, looked at the audience, smiled and said "I am not surprised, they've got access to much better drugs"!

Many a true word spoken in jest, hmm?



**subgeometer**

13 November 2011 1:17am

108

So if they are functional addicts, they can't be that impaired.

But having 96% of addicts functional is just too much, something must be done to ensure more of them are ostracised and cast out.

Random piss tests for all in the police state - is a fundamental abuse of human rights.



**bloggsie45**

13 November 2011 1:54am

25

It's the widespread and apparently socially acceptable culture of the so called 'Liquid Lunch' which renders so many, supposedly functional, alcoholics in high places becoming distinctly non-functional during the afternoon sober-up time before driving home.

In spite of all the scape-goats enumerated on these pages by card-carrying members of the Bigot Society, I am convinced this is the main cause of Britain's current woes.

Government of the Day: Fix it!



**vanhaddock**

13 November 2011 1:55am

54

Let's not forget one of the most vulnerable groups. Those who teach in our comprehensives are hoovering up vast amounts of alcohol. Believe me!



**michaelimb**

13 November 2011 2:26am

86

As the old saying goes, an alcoholic is a man who drinks more than his doctor.



**twopennorth**

13 November 2011 3:25am

243

What can be done to address the epidemic of addiction to money, status and power?



**huristix**

13 November 2011 6:42am

30

So far the posts seem to regard all of this with some amusement but I have encountered some pretty horrible stories that other readers might like to consider in relation to this important story.

\* the case of the elderly terminally ill woman transferred to a hospice who had been receiving morphine in the previous facility. Was not given morphia at the new one having no pain relief AND experiencing narcotic withdrawals in the last few weeks of her life. The facility told the family concerned it was an administrative error-a story which they accepted but given that all could see the agony the poor woman was suffering, was hardly convincing and I believe was a cover for a rogue medical professional using the drug for themselves

\*the case of the nurse addicted to methamphetamine who supplied herself from the hospital pharmacy cupboard in the very small badly managed aged care facility where she worked (she was an alcoholic and the meth helped her mask her condition)

\*the case in Melbourne Australia where an anaesthetist working in an abortion clinic infected around thirty women with the same strain of Hepatitis C as he himself had- the medical board knew that he had a heroin addiction and he had had twelve months suspension and "counselling" before working at the clinic. Did he run a line through himself and the women concerned during these operations?

**SMOGBAD**

13 November 2011 6:56am

16



"Doctors" ? "Lawyers" ? what planet are you living on ? Tax cuts for the rich on the backs of the exploited and addicted revenue providing poor who are drinking themselves (and smoking is still 20-27% amongst teenagers) to death. Serial k\*\*\*\*rs in the treasury and cabinet have rejected copious advice and epidemiological evidence from medics for years. Education?\*!!&?. Ken Clark is the worst of them all. Back of the fag packet calculations suggest excess mortality of 9,000,000 since 1956 (Macmillan's infamous memo).



**MsHedgehog**

13 November 2011 6:58am

67

How many articles does it take to say 'SOCIETY IS SICK'. And its not just sick because of warped minded politicians and greedy bankers. The UK (and other countries no doubt) has a sickness that is so deeply entrenched in its culture that I can't see it coming out without radical rethink of its societal and historic values. Even the psychologist are messed up!

Addiction is the end manifestation, not the beginning of the problem.

If its not drink and drugs its...

- ...the rape epidemic, including the grooming of young girls and boys by sexually predatory gangs (include some media in this)
- ...the rising rates of cancer,
- ...parents murdering their children,
- ...depression and mental illness on the rise,
- ...relationships breaking up at ridiculous rates,
- ...children bullying children on facebook, leading to an eventual suicide,
- ...the over-sexualisation of children which is no doubt related to the increased infections of STD's, young single parents,
- ...exhausted, frustrated, overworked parents and teachers,
- ...young people accumulating massive debt just for wanting to study at a university,
- ...obesity and anorexia epidemics

We're sick people. Sick.



**MsHedgehog**

13 November 2011 6:59am

15

Response to [twopennorth](#), 13 November 2011 3:25am

That's what I call a real question.

The answer to which, I don't have but I would hazard a guess that addressing re-examining the historic cultural behaviour that led to this addiction might be a good place to start...



**freespeechoneeach**

13 November 2011 7:02am

51

Addiction to alcohol is in a different, much more serious, category to other addictions, and should be treated as such. Where a user of Class A drugs can be expected to come out the other side successfully, someone addicted to alcohol cannot. Just look at Amy Winehouse; quit heroin and coke, died from alcoholism. Yet (perversely,) alcohol is not classified under the Misuse of Drugs Act, and (outrageously,) it is lawful for any adult to give any child of five years old any amount of any kind of alcohol, behind closed doors.



**WolfieKate**

13 November 2011 7:19am

242

I was a functioning alcoholic and you can do it when your young. But eventually it takes its toll. You can't be in your 40s and 50s and chucking down twenty units every night and get up the next day and work effectively. I am nearly one year dry and very happy to finally be free of the stuff. But I have to reinvent myself now... no longer able to really join in the UK booze culture it makes you feel like you are on the fringes. If I ever get a job how do I explain my preference for lemonade at work dos.. I wish we more tolerant of not drinking. Well getting a job is my main aim.. I'll tackle the "i'm teetotal" bit later. Better teetotal and socially inadequate than a liver and a brain on the verge of collapse.



**silverthread**

13 November 2011 7:32am

22

Help those who really need it and can't afford to pay for it. These lawyers, bankers, doctors and dentists know exactly what they are doing, they are supposed to be intelligent and well educated and have the means to get help themselves. We definitely do not want any of our taxes being used to support them. The Tories complained about Labour's Nanny State, well stop nannying those who should know better. I remember our GP arriving at our house when my son was very poorly (in the

days GPs still made home visits) and he could hardly speak and smelled of alcohol. We made a complaint but it was never acted upon.



### twopennorth

13 November 2011 7:39am

13

Response to [MsHedgehog](#), 13 November 2011 6:59am

Yes, I posed the question seriously though not without irony. I don't think it unreasonable to suggest that these addictions are doing far greater damage to human welfare than all other forms of 'substance' abuse.

Clearly there's no easy solution given that the extent to which our society idealises status, wealth and power. A first step would be to recognise these addictions as addictions, indeed as forms of mental imbalance. The cure may require us to reappraise not only our values but our prevailing materialist worldview. A big ask, but perhaps a prerequisite for living sanely, sustainably - and substance free.



### BABELrevisited

13 November 2011 7:59am

44

That's what massive pay rises do for you.



### BABELrevisited

13 November 2011 8:04am

12

All you legalized addicts out there, Britain needs you, the pimping branch of the Exchequer exhorts you to do your duty.



### Rectinol

13 November 2011 8:07am

13

Everyone is addicted to something? ... most of them are covered in the 7 deadly sins. Some slip under the radar ... like 'Holier Than Thou-ness' or " He is naughty and doesnt deserve to live as he likes" - ness . Neat-Freaks are the ones that worry me ... ' That Country is a mess - lets bomb it clean ' , or " Those unwashed Hippies

protesting in London ( 4 in greater cause ) need the life-hose ... You would think Quacks could see the results of too much 'medication' and yet it doesnt faze them? ... Everyone is addicted to something.



### Iierbag

13 November 2011 8:28am

86

I'm attributing the lack of feedback from lawyers, to the fact that their written replies won't attract a £150 fee.



### BABELrevisited

13 November 2011 8:34am

Should have said do and pay your duty.



### Rectinol

13 November 2011 8:38am

9

Response to [Iierbag](#), 13 November 2011 8:28am

... Perfect ...



### HumanBoeing

13 November 2011 8:40am

15

So, let's do a 'Grand Designs' and build a nice, sleek, minimalist drug and alcohol agency where the middle classes won't have to suffer the company of the hoi polloi?



### Anselmus

13 November 2011 8:43am

42

Yes, we all know....there are millions of hard core pill poppers and addicted professionals in every walk of life dependant on pharmaceutical drugs. Depressed and sleepless, they take refuge in prescribed (or not) chemicals.

...and they have the audacity to curse, incarcerate and criminalize partakers of the benign herb, C. sativa.  
Sick? Who's sick?



**missileman**

13 November 2011 8:59am

22

Being paid too much.



**rebsamsue**

13 November 2011 8:59am

39

When you look at the number of outlets for alcohol in the houses of parliament, not withstanding the amounts kept in MP's offices, would'nt it be a good idea to randomly breathalise members at their work. After all the results of the job they are doing does suggest that other forces are at work on their ability to think straight. Perhaps as in the world of work inhabited by the workers the workplace should be an alcohol free zone.



**languageandgenes**

13 November 2011 9:03am

61

Too much money, too much free time, too much substance abuse.

We should have a national maximum salary in society, just like we have a national minimum.

People with little money are struggling to survive, people with lots of money are wasting it on leasure addictive substances.

What about the safety of their customers, and patients?



**languageandgenes**

13 November 2011 9:06am

2

Response to [vanhaddock](#), 13 November 2011 1:55am

What about the Tories, and the Treasury?



**foolishholdman**

13 November 2011 9:18am

58

Response to [rollingstone33](#), 13 November 2011 1:06am

"ahhhh what a shame the highly paid people like a little drinkie and the city banks like to shite cash away on coke. these high-earners

my heart bleeds."

You are missing the point! There is a danger to them, sure, but the danger that worries me more is to us. Who wants a "functioning" dentist working inside his mouth? Who wants a "functioning" alcoholic Lawyer when he has been wrongly accused of rape/murder/hit & run driving? Who wants a drunken banker to decide whether to evict him or not? Who wants an alcoholic doctor diagnosing his cancer worries?



**Anselmus**

13 November 2011 9:18am

4

These chemical junkies are everywhere, you also see them on TV and hear them on radio, using mothers little helpers to build up the confidence and stamina to appear in public. One even hears comedy show contestants admitting to being perked up on something.



**foolishholdman**

13 November 2011 9:32am

20

Response to [BABELrevisited](#), 13 November 2011 7:59am

I don't think massive pay rises do this to you on their own. I suspect that this is a symptom of too much stress, overwork, guilt, and too much spare cash taken together.



**Stayrree**

13 November 2011 9:43am

40

Response to [WolfieKate](#), 13 November 2011 7:19am

I'm pleased you're feeling so much better now you're off the sauce, **WolfieKate**. As for what to do when being looked at askance by work colleagues when you don't drink anything stronger than lemonade (which simply indicates that they probably have unhealthy relationships with alcohol themselves): simply inform them that you're allergic to alcohol and drinking even a little can leave you feeling very ill and bring on horrific migraines. If they're not complete morons - always a possibility - that should stop them in their tracks.



**pussycat476**

13 November 2011 10:01am

14

I think that many people just don't place enough significance on alcohol as a serious substance of abuse. Alcohol, if taken regularly to combat stress or as a relaxant or just to help you socialise, will eventually do the opposite for you. If you think you may have an alcohol addiction there is one sure an easy way of finding out for sure...TRY GIVING IT UP. And if you can't or have difficulty doing so go to an AA meeting or read the AA Big Book.



**whythisishappening**

13 November 2011 10:02am

49

Response to [WolfieKate](#), 13 November 2011 7:19am

Just be your self my friend. Well done on not drinking. Don't go back.



**giveusaclue**

13 November 2011 10:04am

5

Response to [rebsamsue](#), 13 November 2011 8:59am

I'd prefer those outlets, both for food and drink not to be subsidised.



**giveusaclue**

13 November 2011 10:07am

49

Response to [WolfieKate](#), 13 November 2011 7:19am

Never apologise, never explain. Or if you do, just say "I like lemonade".

And good for you by the way.



**hugatoryhugsnotvotes**

13 November 2011 10:13am

45

Our society encourages and rewards sociopathic behaviour.



**Meitnerium278**

13 November 2011 10:22am

17

Response to [BABELrevisited](#), 13 November 2011 7:59am

That's what massive pay rises do for you.

Insightful observation. Public health in the USA improved during the Depression.

Parts of the West are killing themselves because their disposable income gets spent on drugs. And the strangest of all things is that they do not seem to notice.



**Meitnerium278**

13 November 2011 10:25am

44

Response to [WolfieKate](#), 13 November 2011 7:19am

I have an inherited alcohol intolerance. A tablespoon of sherry will cause a week of IBS and headaches. Tell people that's your problem. If you suspect someone has spiked your drink at a works do, report in sick next day and give that as the reason.

**StayFree**

13 November 2011 10:27am

16



Response to [giveusaclue](#), 13 November 2011 10:07am

While this does make sense, I know from experience that quite a lot of people just won't let it rest when you say you don't drink/don't *want* to drink alcohol. I'm very lucky in that I've never been addicted myself but I know people who are and the allergy excuse has always left them in peace when they'd have otherwise continued to have been badgered about their decision to abstain.



**joxer100**

13 November 2011 10:29am

7

some high achievers will say they functioned better because of the substances, not despite them. A crisis usually precipitates the tipping over into dysfunction and unmanageability and that's when they become a danger to themselves and others. What to do about it? It's a complex subject with as many solutions as there are victims and also accessing proper help is fraught with danger, not least from those high end agencies who probably sponsored the conference the articles information came from. I can't understand some of the comments here saying these people don't deserve sympathy/help because they are wealthy or because of their occupation. Nobody would willingly choose death by cirrhosis of the liver and if you've ever witnessed it, you wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy. Nevertheless, these individuals with the problem are ultimately the only ones who can do anything about it. You can make it harder for individuals to self destruct, in this instance usually with much tighter workforce regulation (say the same consequences that pilots face if caught drunk on duty).



**UnderminingOrthodoxy**

13 November 2011 10:31am

7

Research suggests 15-24% of lawyers will suffer from alcoholism during their careers, while the British Medical Association estimates that one in 15 healthcare professionals will develop an addiction problem.

This would be easier to understand if both figures were in the same format:-  
15-24% of lawyers ... 7% of doctors.  
Looks like doctors are more trustworthy than lawyers :)



**mikedow**

13 November 2011 10:36am

35

When poor people are addicts we tromp on them , completely missing the 'canary in the coal mine'. Valued members of society are at threat and now it's an issue.



**giveusaclue**

13 November 2011 10:45am

4

Response to [StayFree, 13 November 2011 10:27am](#)

Right, it's a shame that people can be like that - perhaps they have a problem they won't admit to themselves if they want everyone else to drink alcohol too?



**SwisshedCottage**

13 November 2011 10:48am

16

The larger question is why is UK culture so drug-obsessed? Why do so many Brits bring-drink, a behavior that's not found with such frequency in Europe (with the possible exception of Finland), or in Latin America & the US? In Germany, Italy, Australia and the US, when a group of people over the age of 21 go out for drinks, its a couple of drinks and a good time - in this country, its drink as much as you can, vomit in the streets and pass out in a bus shelter. Why?



**Cellarman**

13 November 2011 10:52am

14

. Functioning alcoholics make mistakes due to their problem. It takes ever greater errors to be made before recognition of the problem sets in.  
It's a big step to take to help get treatment for an addiction. Help needn't be faux religion like AA or GA or NA. Local addiction services are pretty non judgemental. Use them if you need to.

What's the addiction rate for journos?

**duthealla**

14



13 November 2011 10:55am

MsHedgehog, I have often wondered - especially since parenthood - how children can be so happy and confident compared to adults. They meet new friends in the park and 2 mins later they are whooping with excitement. Wonder where it all goes wrong?

Good luck wolfiekate!



**IsThatIt**

13 November 2011 10:55am

12

Response to [missileman](#), 13 November 2011 8:59am

I expected the usual vitriol from hard done by posters who should probably get out more, but Guardian readers complaining about health care professionals being paid too much... I wasn't ready for that.

Comments for this discussion are now closed.

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