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I DRINK, YOU LOSE

By Julius Wachtel, (c) 2010

When's the last time that someone in authority *encouraged* you to drink? For LiberalPig that happy occasion took place on June 4, 2008 at the Beckman Center of the National Academy of Sciences, when Dr. Francisco Ayala, Bren Professor of Biological Sciences at U.C. Irvine lectured on "[Elixir of Life: Wine and Health](#)." Enlivened by Power Point slides of ancient Egyptian wine jars, pretty grapes and the occasional statistical U-curve, Dr. Ayala's talk was, as the Center's website promised, all about the benefits of the fruity beverage: "Wine grapes are one of the major human food crops, and there is now *overwhelming* evidence that drinking wine in moderation is beneficial to human health" (emphasis added.)

Back home, LiberalPig (who teaches an introductory research methods course) used online tools to check out the current literature. He found considerable but not "overwhelming" agreement that alcohol might benefit the cardiovascular system. Although Dr. Ayala contended that wine held a distinct advantage, a recent article concluded that once researchers controlled for the fattier diets of beer guzzlers the foamy brew offered as much of an advantage as wine.

What Dr. Ayala didn't mention is that the [American Heart Association](#), the nation's go-to source on cardiovascular issues, "does not recommend drinking wine or any other form of alcohol to gain [cardiovascular] benefits." Unlike Dr. Ayala, who encouraged consuming as many as four or five glasses of (preferably red) wine a day, the AHA discourages nondrinkers from getting started and cautions those who do to limit their intake to no more than two servings. It also questions the science. Since there have been no "direct comparison trials" -- administering controlled doses of alcohol to a randomly selected group over time, then comparing their health to an equivalent group of nondrinkers -- the reported effects of booze could well be due to lifestyle or other factors.

Neither did Dr. Ayala reveal that drinking is frowned on by the American Medical Association. Why they're such spoilsports is obvious. According to an article published in the authoritative [AMA Journal](#), alcohol consumption was the third leading cause of death in the U.S. in 2000, following tobacco and poor diet/physical inactivity.

But let's not quibble. Probably the most notable thing about Dr. Ayala's address was what he left out. Extolling the virtues of drink for a full hour, he said virtually nothing

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about its downsides, and absolutely nothing about the effects of drinking on *others*. For example, it's well established that even small amounts of alcohol can impair [judgment](#) and [motor](#) skills, with deficiencies in [cognition](#) lingering even as BAC (blood alcohol concentration) decreases.

- It's not just "drunk" drivers who are the problem. According to the [California DMV](#), the chances of having an accident are *five times higher* after having only a *single drink*.
- A report by the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) (NHTSA) concluded that there is "strong evidence that impairment of some driving-related skills begins with *any departure from zero BAC*" (emphasis added).
- [NHTSA](#) data also revealed that in 2006 *more* persons died in alcohol-related crashes where a driver had been drinking but *wasn't* legally drunk (17,602 deaths with BAC between .01 and .08) than where a driver *was* legally drunk (15,121 deaths with BAC of .08 and above).

Alcohol also turns out to be a crucial factor in crime, especially assaultive offenses. According to the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), more than one-third of convicted offenders under supervision in 1996 were drinking when they committed their crimes.

Well, back to the lecture hall. After an hour's hard work it was time for...you guessed it, a drink! Above and beyond the usual post-lecture fare of fruit, cheese and sweets the Academy was serving complimentary glasses of wine. Imagine a couple hundred seniors, many of whom can't drive that well when sober, getting behind the wheel after a snort or two. Oh, did we mention it was in the evening? (Full disclosure: LiberalPig is himself pushing the big six-oh.)

Dr. Ayala informed his audience that he and his wife own a vineyard in Northern California and supply grapes to major wine producers. Perhaps that might explain why he at times seemed much more the cheerleader than the dispassionate scientist. As much as LiberalPig appreciated the disclosure, revealing a conflict of interest doesn't really resolve it.

Perhaps in the future the good doctor might leave it to someone else to extoll the benefits of imbibing. And to the Academy: please -- no more free samples!