

Preventing injuries from bar glasses

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EDITOR, - Jonathan Shepherd's editorial on preventing injuries from bar glasses highlights the importance of violence as a public health issue.¹

Work in the south east of England to determine priorities in preventing accidents and reducing injuries that are consistent with the Health of the Nation strategy has provisionally identified assaults among young men (aged 15 to 34) as an area for further consideration.²

As a result, East Sussex Health Authority is currently conducting a retrospective study into the causes of injury among the 316 declared victims of assault who attended a local accident and emergency department in 1993. How many of these assaults involved injuries from beer glasses has yet to be determined. Initial correspondence with the local licensed victuallers association suggests, however, that publicans will be resistant to the voluntary introduction of tempered glassware regardless of the final extent of the problem. This is partly because they are suspicious that the safety properties of tempered glassware have been exaggerated for commercial reasons.

Therein lies a catch 22. Unless a large control group of public houses voluntarily adopts tempered glassware, it is difficult to build a strong case for the effectiveness of tempered glass in reducing injuries. Without a convincing case for its benefits, it is difficult to persuade publicans to gradually switch over to it. However, the gravity of the physical and psychological trauma of attacks with glasses is such that preventive action should not be further delayed by this quandary.

The government is currently reviewing existing consumer protection legislation. I think that public health doctors should use this opportunity to lobby in support of Shepherd's arguments for a safety standard for beer glasses.

No such thing as safe glass

EDITOR, - Jonathan Shepherd has noted the differences between tempered (toughened) and annealed (untoughened) glasses.¹ In 1975 it was reported that 22% of crimes of violence in a Scottish city involved "bottles or tumblers."² The British crime survey indicated that only 31% of violent offences in public houses or clubs were reported to the police. There were an estimated 420 000 assaults in such places in England and Wales in 1991.³

During 1993 a survey was conducted in Edinburgh. A systematic random sample of 100 public houses was selected. Telephone interviews were conducted with their managers or owners. Ninety five respondents cooperated with this exercise.

Of those who responded, 51 used only annealed glasses, 31 only tempered glasses, and nine both; four were unsure. Tempered glasses were reported to be safer, more durable, and therefore slightly cheaper than annealed glasses. Of managers using only one type of glass, 19 stated that tempered glasses were safer, none preferred annealed glasses, and 10 were uncertain. On the other hand, of managers using one brand of annealed glass, seven stated that tempered glasses were safer and 29 did not know ($X^2=9.72$, $df=1$; $P<0.01$). Eleven respondents who thought that tempered glasses were safer mentioned that such glasses shattered into small innocuous fragments, but two managers reported that tempered glasses sometimes exploded in hot water. More injuries to staff had occurred during the previous two years with annealed than with tempered glasses ($X^2=9.72$, $df=1$; $P<0.01$). Five injuries caused by glasses were deliberate; only one of them involved a tempered glass. Only two serious accidental injuries were related to glasses, one a tempered glass, the other an annealed glass. Seventy two reports of injuries from glasses or bottles were noted in the past two years. Only nine of these were said to have been deliberate. Four of these assaults involved bottles.

These results suggest that tempered glasses may be preferable to annealed glasses. Even so, several safety problems were also reported in relation to tempered glasses. There is probably no such thing as a safe glass. Public bars are a commonplace forum for intoxication, aggression, and related injuries and assaults. Indeed, the design and operation of such premises may influence levels of aggression and intoxication.⁴ Evidence on the merits of tempered glasses is not definitive. More research is required to produce a clear picture of the role of glasses, bottles, and other artefacts in bar injuries. It is particularly important to ascertain whether the introduction of tempered glasses into bars leads to a fall in injuries or simply to the adoption of other forms of weapon.

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