

Born in the mining town of Wonthaggi in 1951, I grew up on a farm at Woolamai, near Wonthaggi, as the second eldest in a family of eight children. My father regularly attended the local Methodist Church and all his children participated in Sunday School. As I recall, in those days, Methodists promoted abstinence from alcohol and gambling in any form. However, my father would on rare occasions share a bottle of beer with visitors to our home.

My first memory of drinking a beer was on a very hot day in December when at the age of 15 I was working on a hay carting team with my father, oldest brother and our share-farmer. The share-farmer brought a cold bottle of beer down to the shed and wanted to share it with the team. We had just finished lunch, so beer was poured into tea cups and my brother and I were offered a small amount in a cup to try. I did not like the flavor at all and did not want any more when it was offered.

Motivated by having made a decision to become a Christian some years earlier and hearing several sermons preached touching on the dangers of consuming alcohol and the tragic examples of lives ruined by alcohol, I determined not to drink alcohol at all with the exception of my home brewed ginger beer which my parents allowed and I justified as it had a very low or minimal alcohol content.

After I completed studies to qualify as a secondary school teacher, I was appointed to a remote country town in the Mallee where I discovered that most social events involved consumption of alcohol, and drinking large amounts of alcohol on any one occasion was bragged about by many young men in the district. Other young men prided themselves in staying "coherent" and "fully" in control of their faculties while downing six or more glasses of beer. I refrained from drinking beer and took up the option of lemon soda or cola as my preferred drinks. I found I could enjoy myself and the company of others as much as anyone who was drinking.

I soon transferred to Melbourne where I socialised with other young people who would dine and drink very modestly – or not at all. In these circumstances, I was also introduced to wines of various types and relaxed my inhibitions on drinking alcohol. The focus in these social settings was on enjoying the company and conversations of others and not on drinking large amounts in order to enjoy myself. It only took me one or at most two glasses of wine to get a feeling that my head was starting to spin a little and I would stop drinking - so I never got drunk or sick from consuming alcohol.

While I would regularly drink a wine before or with a meal, it was only when I retired from full time work that I found it appealing to be able to enjoy a drink or two after my evening meal. In a sense it was a way of celebrating the fact that I did not have to go to work the very next day and in another way, it was drinking until I did get a head spinning effect from the alcohol and generally a warm feeling of "wellbeing". I tried out different ports and wines of the red variety and found a few I really liked for their flavour, hoping that the antioxidants and natural ingredients in them would help contribute to a healthy lifestyle.

Over several months following my retirement, I found myself looking forward to having a port or two after each meal ... to the extent that I did not want to miss out on a relaxing drink every evening... I normally had no evening commitments or pressing tasks to do before the next day and enjoyed the relaxed feeling I got from drinking a couple of glasses.

However, one evening while watching a TV documentary analyzing the symptoms and effects of alcohol addiction, I wondered whether I was displaying the related symptoms and depended on my evening drinking to the point that I might possibly (but not likely) be addicted. At the time, I passed myself off as a very moderate drinker, but continued to give the matter some attention... Could I be addicted? I tried a few nights without alcohol after the meal and felt I was missing out, so I went back to drinking a few glasses after the evening meal to complete the day's activities.

Several months went by before I came across some more information in the media that suggested everyone should, for the benefit of their own health, have two or three days a week when they don't drink alcohol. Along with my concern that I may be becoming dependent on a regular daily "fix" of alcohol, I determined to allocate two days per week when I did not drink. It was hard to do for the first few months. I was encouraged by a colleague in a Christian training organisation for which I was a volunteer who shared how he had taken up the same commitment some months before me in the interest of achieving a more healthy lifestyle.

As I further reflected on my experiences and became more comfortable with having a "relaxing" drink 4 or 5 nights a week, I started to analyse what I was relaxing from and what may have been causing some stress in the first place. It came to my realisation that I was probably suppressing feelings of loss of contacts and status which went with my last job in education. I also had occasional and recurring twinges of regret for some of the mistakes I had made and times when things which did not work out well in my former career and started to realize that the drink in the evening would "soften" the sense of regret for things altogether in the past... and probably forgotten by any others who were involved.

It was not until almost two years after I retired that I decided that I did not need the evening tittle and stopped drinking after meals completely. At this time I found that I could separate myself almost entirely from my past career experiences and look at my current personal life and volunteer work as my focus. Any time I got twinges of regret or wanting to have a connection with past work relationships, I could put these feelings quickly and completely into a very balanced perspective. On reflection, and as some recent research has shown, alcohol can often delay the resolution of memories of past issues and regrets.

In 2008, I had a full health and fitness check up and was given an exercise routine which took up about an hour each evening for most of the week. This gave me a very good diversion and alternative to sitting around with very little to do in the evening! I soon found that my health and fitness were improving significantly, but it required a concerted effort and commitment to do the exercises, not leaving it up to the alcohol to make me “feel” better.

On joining the team at Dalgarno Institute in 2009, I was still drinking a diluted mix of wine and water (equal to about one standard drink) before meals. As part of my work with the Institute, I discovered that incredible extent of the negative impact of alcohol consumption on health and wellbeing and that it is a worldwide issue. Countries which in the last two centuries or at present ban or severely restrict the consumption of alcohol have relatively low rates of heart and cardiovascular diseases compared to countries with liberal laws or little regulation on alcohol sales and consumption. I was reading extensively about the overwhelming evidence gleaned from research in Australian and overseas on the damage and risk that consumption of any amount of alcohol can have on a person, their health and their life circumstances.

Consequently, in 2010 I have made a further change to my drinking habits. Water is a great alternative for drinking before and during meals! I rarely have an alcoholic drink – and if I do, it is diluted with water anyway. Herbal teas accompanied by a small amount of dark chocolate are a healthy alternative after meals and some herbal teas would rival red wines for the levels of antioxidants they contain!

I feel like my life is moving on and my capacity to enjoy life and social situations is in no way limited by not consuming alcohol. For me, it is really a matter of personal choice and I feel I am benefiting from choosing alternatives to alcohol.

Derek