

A social drink could lead to serious professional risk



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Alcohol on the breath in the workplace — whether it's the result of a few drinks at a social event or a serious drinking problem — is always inappropriate, and, as the following examples illustrate, may expose physicians to serious professional risks. Although not all of the physicians

cited below are alcohol dependent, they each faced serious consequences due to activities which resulted in alcohol on the breath at work.

- *The doctor went out for lunch and had a couple of drinks with his meal. The first patient he saw after lunch, upset by a prolonged wait, noticed alcohol on the doctor's breath. The patient filed a complaint with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. While this was stressful for the physician, assessment later revealed episodic alcohol abuse, which was easily helped with some counselling.*

- *The anesthetist was becoming increasingly irritable and unreliable. Some of her colleagues noticed that they could occasionally smell alcohol on her breath in the morning, especially on Mondays. She was eventually diagnosed and treated as alcohol dependent.*

- *The surgeon spent a pleasant evening with friends enjoying good food and wine. They socialized into the small hours of the morning. While he was not on-call that night, he was in the OR by 8:00 a.m. that morning. The nurses in the OR could detect alcohol on the doctor's breath and reported that to the chief of staff. Assessed later, there proved to be no ongoing alcohol problem.*

Alcohol is absorbed quickly through the GI tract in 30-60 minutes after ingestion. Absorption, and therefore elimination, is slowed by the presence of food. Women absorb alcohol in greater amounts than men as they have less gastric dehydrogenase, an enzyme which begins metabolism of alcohol even as it is absorbed through the stomach. Once absorbed, alcohol is evenly distributed throughout body water, crossing the blood-brain barrier. Blood alcohol diffuses readily into the alveoli of the lungs and hence into expired air. Alcohol in the blood means alcohol in the brain and breath — detectable by many.

While the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for driving in Ontario is .08 mg/dL (80 mg%), blood alcohol levels as low as .02 mg/dL have been shown to cause a measure of impairment for some drivers. And some individuals are capable of experiencing relatively high blood alcohol levels even after few drinks, especially if consumed quickly on an empty stomach.

Is any BAC other than zero acceptable for a physician at work? Alco-

hol is metabolized quickly, by most, at a rate of .015 mg/dL per hour. Therefore moderate drinking in the evening (2-4 drinks resulting in a BAC of less than .08 mg/dL) will result in negligible blood or breath alcohol the next morning. We might then conclude that noticeable breath alcohol in the morning indicates either heavy drinking the night before, or consumption of alcohol in the morning, both indicators of a possible problem with alcohol.

Avoid problems by not drinking alcohol during the workday and keeping consumption moderate the night before. And, if you detect alcohol on the breath of a colleague, take this seriously — there may be a problem.

If you or a physician you know is in need of the confidential services offered by the Physician Health Program, please contact the OMA at 1-800-851-6606 or (416) 340-2972.

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