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Letters from Ireland

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Letter from Ireland

A recent article in the *Irish Medical Journal* gives the rather startling but not unexpected statistic that Dublin has a rate of 34.4 per 100,000 of the population for first admissions to hospitals for treatment of alcoholism. Granted the legendary and unenviable reputation of the Irish for drinking, it is a sobering thought that one quarter of the first admissions to psychiatric hospitals are for alcoholism. This brings the problem to major public health levels. It seems clear that this rate is one of the highest recorded — only the French have comparable statistics. Our problem is probably even greater, because the sample of population considered contained a heavy loading of upper social groups. A great deal of the alcoholism in the lower groups never leads to hospitalization, but occasionally to the law courts.

Now a sizeable amount of our annual revenue comes from taxation on drink and the advertising is both regular and pervasive on Press and Television. At the same time much effort is expended in persuading school children to take the pledge against alcohol, but it seems that adult re-education is also of prime importance. In the next few months blood alcohol tests will be used in this country when prosecutions for drunk driving come before the courts. It is no compliment to us that we will probably use a much higher level of blood alcohol than other countries as evidence of over-drinking. It is hoped that this deterrent will reduce not only road fatalities but also act on the public conscience in general, and especially the young drinkers will realise that this is only one facet of a very complex problem, but there is hope that if young people can be trained in proper drinking habits the results should become apparent in time, because the highest incidence of alcoholism is in the 30-60 age group.

In recent years the Irish Medical Association has set up a Committee of experts to study Maternal Mortality. They are given reports on all cases occurring in this country, and their findings are published with the view that circulation of accurate information must help progress towards the elimination of the tragedies. The Maternal Mortality rate of 1964 was 0.64 per 1000 births, and 0.56 in 1966. It is interesting to compare some statistics from Great Britain, at 0.22 excluding abortions, and the U.S.A. 0.33, both for 1964. These figures however can be misleading because of such factors as altered notification procedures. However what does certainly emerge is that the greatest cause in Great Britain and the U.S.A. of Maternal Mortality was abortion and sepsis (roughly 22%), and following this toxemia, pre and post partum haemorrhages, phlebitis and embolism. In Ireland the leading cause of death was haemorrhage, followed by embolism, toxemia and heart disease — abortion is not mentioned. Since it is to be hoped that all deaths from haemorrhage will eventually be prevented, there is a chance for a "very good statistic" in this country in the years to come. A significant factor in the Irish result was that 15% of the mothers were "indigent" and probably had no antenatal care at all.

The merging of the two main Universities of Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin is proceeding slowly and amicably. Tribute should be paid to the late Minister of Education, Donogh O'Malley, who instituted this reform, and many others also, as Minister of Health. He died suddenly early this year, and was mourned by all irrespective of politics and creed.

Robert F. O'Donoghue