Evaluation of rehabilitation courses in Great Britain

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1. Introduction.

Excessive consumption of alcohol before driving is recognised worldwide as the largest single contributory factor in road accidents. In Great Britain fifteen percent of the deaths on the roads currently are due to drinking and driving. Although over the last ten years this number has halved, it is still unacceptably high, and it has been estimated that there are around a million incidents per week of over the limit driving in Britain.

Approximately 100,000 drivers per year are convicted for drink/drive offences in Great Britain, (Government Statistical Service, 1989). Usually these offenders are disqualified from driving for, at least, the statutory minimum period of 1 year, and are also fined, sent to prison or sentenced to a period of community service. However these disposals have a limited deterrent value, as about 10 percent of offenders are re-convicted within 3 years of their conviction, and an estimated additional 40 percent probably re-offend but are not caught.

A drink/drive conviction often indicates a potential, or actual, alcohol problem which will predispose the driver towards continued offending, (Kunkle, 1983). To address this problem it seems appropriate to refer offenders to attend rehabilitation courses which address the drinking element of the offence as well as the risks associated with drinking and driving.

2. Rehabilitation Courses in Great Britain.

The objective of a rehabilitation course is to reduce the incidence of drinking and driving, by influencing offenders attitudes and hence behaviour. To do this courses educate offenders about alcohol, how it affects the body and impairs driving; and encourage offenders to examine their behaviour with respect to alcohol and
consider the need for change. Courses also aim to motivate and assist offenders to separate drinking and driving; and increase awareness of how to resist the pressures to drink and drive. In addition rehabilitation courses should provide further help and support if required.

At present in Great Britain about half of the probation areas offer drink/drive rehabilitation courses, as part of the probation disposal for offenders who are assessed to have a high risk of re-offending. Probation regulations do not allow offenders to be charged with the cost of these rehabilitation courses. The courses are organised into sessions of 2 - 4 hours per week for a period of 8 - 10 weeks. The sessions take the form of informal lectures, group discussions and group counselling, with an emphasis on participant involvement. Courses function most efficiently when the group consists of 8 to 10 offenders.

In Britain probation is intended to be an alternative to a custodial sentence. Consequently rehabilitation has been offered mostly to offenders convicted with a high blood/alcohol level, or an excess alcohol offence for the second or subsequent time. These offenders are referred to the probation service before sentence for various reports, assessment interviews to review their personal circumstances and to assesses their suitability and willingness to attend a drink/drive course. Suitable offenders are made the subject of a probation order which requires them to attend a course. Failure to complete a course constitutes a breach of the order and the offender can be taken back to court and sentenced for the breach or for the original drink/drive offence.


Rehabilitation seeks to achieve its objective of reducing the incidence of drinking and driving by a three stage process, first to improve knowledge about alcohol, leading to a positive change in attitudes to drinking and driving, which subsequently should influence behaviour. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the first two stages can be undertaken using alcohol knowledge tests, alcohol risk profiles, and attitude questionnaires. Short and medium term effectiveness of rehabilitation courses can be measured by comparing the results of these types of tests when administered at the beginning of a course, immediately after, and a longer period of time after completion of the course. This type of evaluation has been attempted for three probation based rehabilitation schemes which, during the evaluation period, ran 59 courses involving around 400 participants.
3.1 Changes in Alcohol Knowledge and Drinking Behaviour

A multiple choice type of alcohol knowledge test was used for a sample of participants and the majority improved their score in the post test. The average before and after course scores were 61% and 75% respectively thus the courses were deemed a success in that by their last session the majority of members were able to score highly on a questionnaire about alcohol and its effects.

Changes in drinking behaviour were associated with the increase in alcohol knowledge. At the beginning of the courses the majority of participants reported average levels of alcohol consumption well in excess of physiologically safe levels. In addition some members were actually demonstrating signs of dependency on alcohol, but few were in any way willing to consider their drinking as a problem. By the end of each course the majority of members reported a heightened awareness of the health issues connected with excessive use of alcohol, and consequently had reduced their alcohol consumption.

One scheme also used a drink profile questionnaire to assess offenders changes in their likelihood of a problem associated with their use of alcohol in terms of their drinking behaviour, psychological aspects, medical aspects, social aspects and their general attitude to alcohol. After the course the majority of course members showed considerable improvements in each area, especially in terms of drinking behaviour and general attitudes towards alcohol.

3.2 Changes in Attitudes towards Drinking and Driving.

At the start of the courses most offenders reported having regularly driven whilst impaired by alcohol. During the courses participants showed a substantial positive shift in their perceptions of the effects of alcohol on driving skills, in their appreciation of the risks and dangers associated with drinking and driving and in their general attitude towards drinking and driving. By the final session of each course all participants were critical of drinking and driving and recognised it as unacceptable behaviour and resolved not to drink and drive again.

One study attempted to quantify offenders changes in attitudes towards drinking and driving by scoring the pre and post course attitude questionnaires. This study
found that over 80% of participants’ attitude scores increased after attending the course, indicating a more positive or ‘correct’ attitude towards drinking and driving.

A long term follow up study attempted to interview course participants after they had regained their driving licences. The data was very limited as the drink/drive offenders proved difficult to trace. The success rate for these interviews was only 20 percent and may over represent the more stable offenders. The results are nevertheless interesting: since resuming driving the majority reported that they attempted to not drive when over the legal limit by adhering to ‘no alcohol’ policies, by drinking low alcohol drinks, by setting personal limits, or by using public transport or designated drivers. However the majority also admitted to having driven, knowing that they were in excess of the legal limit, on at least one occasion since completing the course, and some admitted to drinking and driving regularly.

3.3 Changes in Drink/Drive Behaviour

To obtain a realistic measure of changes in drink/drive behaviour after licence return, offenders re-conviction rates should be measured by monitoring driver records held by the National Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency. Re-conviction rates for offenders attending a rehabilitation course should be compared to re-conviction rates for a matched group of offenders who have not attended a rehabilitation course. This type of comparison has been attempted in England but it proved difficult to match the rehabilitated group which had been formed as a result of various selection processes.

4. Discussion.

To reduce the incidence of drinking and driving a rehabilitation course needs to improve offenders knowledge and behaviour concerning alcohol, and positively change attitudes towards drinking and driving leading to improved behaviour.

Drawing together the results obtained from the evaluations of changes in alcohol knowledge, drinking behaviour, attitudes towards drinking and driving, and post course behaviour, there appears to be a paradoxical contrast between course participants attitudes, beliefs, and their behaviour. The vast majority believed the course had increased their appreciation of the risks and dangers associated with
drinking and driving. It had helped them change their attitudes towards drinking and driving, and recognise it as unacceptable behaviour, and had provoked resolutions not to drink and drive again. Thus the primary effects of rehabilitation seem to have been successful in altering individuals attitudes towards alcohol and their attitudes towards drinking and driving. However few participants were able to support these changes with evidence of reduced offending behaviour.

It is generally assumed that the attitudes of individuals determine their behaviour, but previous research in the field of health education, and more specifically alcohol education, has questioned this: while education can increase individuals' knowledge of alcohol, this does not necessarily result in attitudinal and behavioural change, (Silman, 1979, Bagnall, 1987). Furthermore, even a change in attitude has not necessarily been accompanied by corresponding changes in behaviour, (Silman, 1979).

However the acid test of changed behaviour is to measure changes in re-conviction rates; this will be the principle test in our national rehabilitation experiment described in the next section.

5. The Future of Drink/Drive Courses in Great Britain.

Until now rehabilitation schemes in the UK have operated as a condition of probation. Probation is considered appropriate generally only for offenders who are at risk of a custodial sentence, and therefore excludes most first offenders. However, following a major review of road traffic law, the Road Traffic Act 1991 (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1991) provides the powers necessary for magistrates to refer any drink/drive offenders to attend a rehabilitation course, as part of their sentence, without making a probation order. This experimental disposal will be available at selected courts and will be offered at the discretion of the magistrates for the offender to choose if they wish. Offenders will be required to pay for their course and will be granted a reduction of up to 25 percent in their period of disqualification on satisfactory completion of the rehabilitation course.

The effectiveness of the new courses in influencing attitudes, behaviour and hence reducing re-convictions will be evaluated in a large scale experiment to determine whether they should be applied nationwide. This will be of a 'before and after/experimental and control' type design. Experimental courts will have rehabilitation courses available as a disposal for drivers convicted of drinking and
driving and the matched control courts will not have such courses available. If rehabilitation is effective in reducing re-convictions the re-conviction rate in the experimental courts will be lower than the rate in the control courts. To obtain significant results in terms of reductions in re-conviction rates, monitoring will continue for at least 3 years. Hence the final reporting of reductions in re-conviction rates will not be available until at least 4 years after the start of the experiment, scheduled for early 1993. It is estimated that the final report will be available by 1997 and, I hope reported at this forum.

6. References.


