



**EUROPEAN ALCOHOL POLICY
CONFERENCE
BUILDING CAPACITY FOR ACTION
Barcelona, 3RD-5TH April 2008**

Culture and ethics in the relation of alcohol research and policy

Robin Room, Australia

RobinR@TURNINGPOINT.ORG.AU

Alcohol has many positive and negative symbolic meanings, which interact with the chronic health harms, injuries and social harms from its use. The ethics of alcohol use lie at the junction of symbolic meanings of alcohol and the harms from it. Drinking often causes harm to others as well as to the drinker, which carries considerable ethical weight, while on the other hand alcohol is a valued element in most European cultures. Economic interests provide a strong third force in the debates. Guidelines on low-risk drinking are considered as a case study in the interplay of culture, ethics and science. There are no natural discontinuities in the risk curve relating amount or pattern of drinking to most harms from drinking, so setting a "sensible" or low-risk" limit does not involve just science. Ethics as well as science are thus involved in the answer to "what are acceptable risks?" In most frames of comparison, the risks from drinking are quite high; at a minimum, drinking guidelines need to move towards making the levels of risk explicit.