Inside the NIH Website Controversy Around Alcohol and Cancer Risk

Is the U.S. government soft-pedaling information about drinking and cancer?

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Last week, a public health researcher from Boston University called out the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to change information on one of its websites about the links between drinking alcohol and developing certain types of cancer. In response, the government-led health organization appears to have updated its information—turning a potential controversy into a demonstration of the power of public comment in the U.S. healthcare landscape, Stat News reports.

The initial criticism took form in a letter sent by alcohol researcher Michael Siegel, PhD, of Boston University's School of Public Health. The letter, addressed to NIH Director Francis Collins, MD, called on the federal institute to retract and apologize for its statement on the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism website that says, "Drinking too much alcohol can increase your risk of developing certain cancers."

In the complaint, Siegel argued that by implying that only "too much" drinking is a cancer risk, the NIH was soft-pedaling information on the links between alcohol and cancer, noting that scientific evidence shows even light to moderate drinking can put women at a higher risk of developing breast tumors. "The NIAAA is deceiving and potentially harming women while furthering the agenda of the alcohol industry," Siegel wrote, noting that the NIH has repeatedly been taken to task by advocates for its financial ties to the alcohol industry.

In response to the criticism, the NIAAA has updated its website with a new statement that says, "There is a strong scientific consensus of an association between alcohol drinking and several types of cancer." The new description brings the organization's site copy in line with the National Cancer Institute's statement on alcohol and cancer risk.

The scientist responded by praising the NIH for being so responsive, calling the change "a rare example of a federal agency responding appropriately to public comment."

To learn more about the links between alcohol and cancer risk, click here.

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