

# Law's problem with alcohol is slowly being addressed – but is still hush-hush

All too often the image of a lawyer who enjoys a drink gets out of hand and the legal profession has an alarming rate of alcoholism



**Alex Aldridge**

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Boozy evening dinners with clients remain a feature of the working week for many lawyers. Photograph: Yadid Levy/Yadid Levy/Robert Harding

6pm midweek and El Vino, the renowned Fleet Street haunt of barristers and judges, is packed. In keeping with the legal profession's demographics, the drinkers are mainly white, middle-aged men, ties loosened and complexions rosy as they chat away over their merlots and riojas.

Up the road at the Seven Stars, another lawyer hangout, a similar scene is playing out, albeit with pints of bitter, rather than glasses of wine, as the dominant medium of alcohol consumption. The Cittie of Yorke, round the corner on High Holborn, is doing a roaring trade, too – as are, come to think of it, all the pubs I pass that evening as I stroll around the inns of court area of London. Not that this should come as a surprise;

lawyers are famous for enjoying a drink, after all.

For an alarming number, it gets out of hand. According to recent research published, ~~15-~~ 24% of lawyers will suffer from alcoholism during their careers. LawCare, a charity established in 1997 to help members of the legal profession cope with stress-related problems, says the driven, slightly uptight personality of your typical lawyer, combined with the tough nature of the job, makes them particularly susceptible to heavy drinking.

"Law is a stressful job, featuring long hours and requiring meticulous adherence to consistently high standards, and alcohol is an easily available quick fix," comments Anna Buttimore, a spokesperson for the charity, adding that lawyers "tend to be reluctant to admit they may have issues with stress, and associated dependency problems".

Another factor in lawyers' heavy drinking is the central role of alcohol in legal professional culture. While liquid lunches are less common than in the past, boozy evening client dinners remain a regular feature of the working week for senior commercial solicitors. Partners at the big firms are typically required to attend two to three such functions a week, with one recently confiding to me that he found it near impossible to get through these evenings without drinking. "I'm not sure I could face networking sober," he joked.

Barristers do less schmoozing, but the ups and downs of the cases they spend their lives at the heart of have bred a long tradition of down-time rituals involving booze. Port flows freely at the regular dinners hosted by the inns of court, and drink is a central part of many of the bar's specialist clubs and societies. Meanwhile, the myth of legendary heavy-drinking practitioners of the past, both real and fictional, like the maverick George Carman QC and John Mortimer's claret-loving Rumpole of the Bailey, continue to inform barristers' perceptions of how they should live their lives.

"They don't call it the bar for nothing," quips Dr Neil Brenner, a consultant psychiatrist at the Priory, adding that lawyers make up a disproportionate number of his clients (who also include bankers, accountants and doctors).

Is there any hope for changing this culture? Well, there are at least some positive signs. The profession has certainly become better at owning its problems with stress and alcohol, gradually moving away from an approach that favoured sweeping addiction problems under the carpet to a more open attitude where facing up to the causes of stress is no longer taboo. Online resources like LawCare's fact sheet on dealing with alcoholics in the workplace have helped – particularly at the small firms and barristers'

chambers, which have no human resources staff trained in helping stressed-out employees.

But the old hush-hush mindset remains prevalent. A LawCare account of a fictional lawyer named "Jim", whose experiences are based on a composite of stories frequently relayed to its advisers, illustrates the reputational concerns that often prevent individuals from receiving help.

At one point it states: "A week later I overdid the wine a bit and when the senior partner came to see me in my office at 10.00am. I was very drunk. As a result the firm suggested that I leave, and said that they would give me a good reference if I agreed to do so."

Meanwhile, there is some anecdotal evidence that younger lawyers are more inclined than their senior counterparts to seek out alternative, healthier forms of stress relief. Several junior solicitors I spoke with noted the popularity of gyms among their peer group as an alternative to pubs, for example.

Others suggested that a new breed of "law anoraks", who are increasingly populating a profession where entrance is more than ever determined by academic track records, are simply less into socialising, and, as such, less likely to run into trouble with alcohol.

"We try and get the younger ones out to the pub with us, but they don't want to come any more," says one member of the bar. "My impression is that they prefer to go home and play Sudoku."

These legal geeks may not prove immune to alcohol in the long term, though, warns LawCare's Buttimore. "The young lawyers who contact us usually do so for reasons related to stress," she says. "It's the older ones who tend to have the alcohol problems, which is a reflection of the 20 years or so it takes for stress that is not addressed properly to develop into serious issues with dependency."

The volume on this sort of warning message tends to get turned down as the Christmas party season approaches, then raised again in January. It's a pattern that looks set to continue in the law for a long while yet.

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