

EXPLORING THE FRENCH PARADOX

Is low alcohol consumption good for the heart?

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During the joint Session (French Society-ISH) at the French Society of Hypertension Congress in Paris (December 2023) I discussed the intriguing phenomenon known as the French Paradox (FP) and its association with wine consumption, particularly in light of hypertension guidelines recommending minimal alcohol intake.¹ The FP, first brought to the forefront by Serge Renaud in 1992², highlights a peculiar observation: despite a high intake of saturated fats, France exhibits a remarkably low coronary mortality rate (**figure 1**). Renaud's work suggested that wine, especially when consumed in moderation, might offer a protective effect against heart disease, potentially explaining this paradox.

I delved into the widespread belief, influenced by the FP, that alcohol, particularly wine, could be beneficial for cardiovascular health—a notion supported by various lobbies and commercial interests, leading to a distorted public perception.

In the United States, for example, a significant portion of the population believes alcohol is heart-healthy, a belief often reinforced by media and sometimes even healthcare providers, thereby encouraging increased alcohol consumption.³

I also reviewed the scientific evidence and hypotheses suggesting that components in wine, such as flavonoids, might reduce cardiovascular risk through various mechanisms. However, I pointed out that recent large-scale epidemiological studies have begun to question the protective effects of moderate alcohol consumption, showing that the benefits might not be as clear-cut as previously thought.^{4,5} Furthermore, I highlighted the limitations of such studies, including biases and methodological issues that, when corrected, negate the observed protective effects of alcohol.⁶

A potential solution to these ambiguities, I suggested, is Mendelian randomization studies,

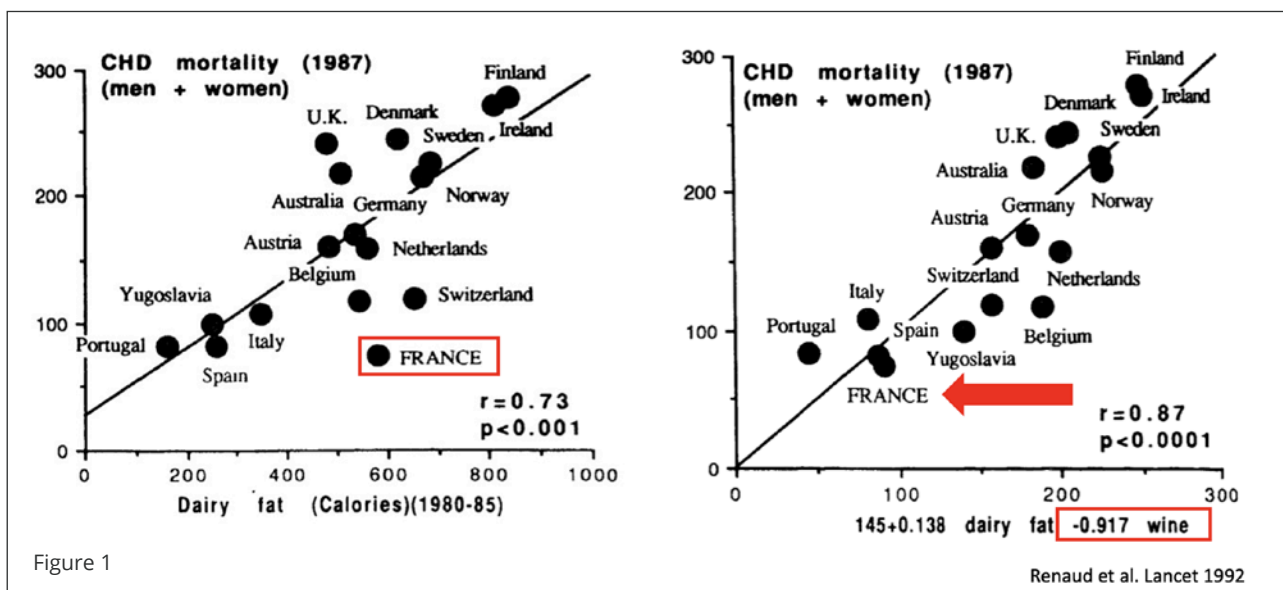


Figure 1

Renaud et al. Lancet 1992

Using mendelian randomization, the curve look very different

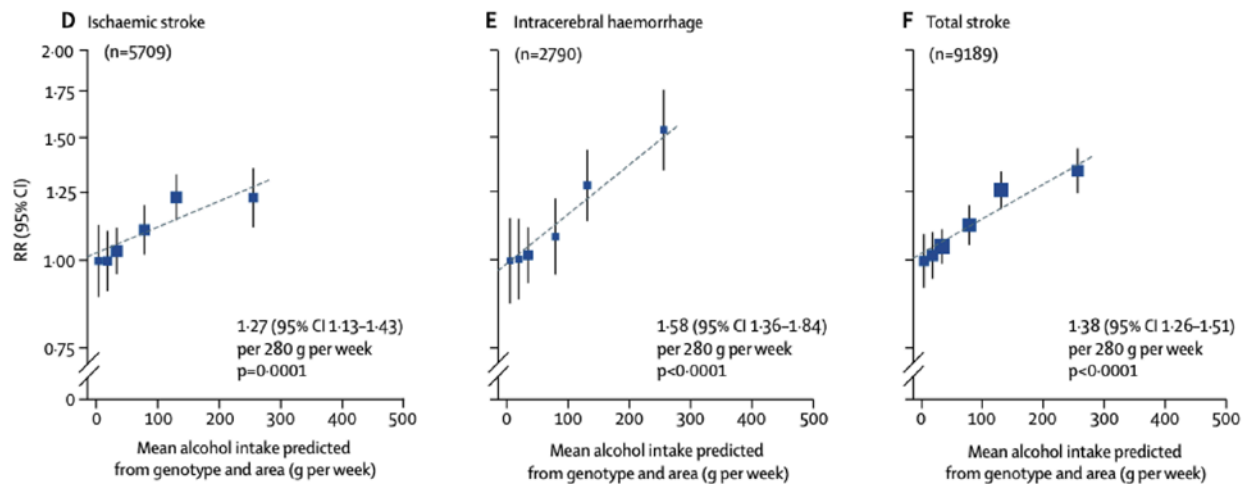


Figure 2

Millwood et al. Lancet 2019

which use genetic variants associated with alcohol consumption to explore its effects on health outcomes. These studies offer a more unbiased insight into the relationship between alcohol and cardiovascular risk. For instance, a study using this approach in China found that the supposed J-curve relationship between alcohol intake and cardiovascular risk disappears when genetic predispositions to alcohol consumption are considered⁷ (**figure 2**).

In concluding, I proposed an alternative perspective on the French Paradox, suggesting it may be less about the wine and more about the French lifestyle. This includes taking time to enjoy meals, making dining a convivial experience, and overall, leading a healthy lifestyle. As I emphasised at the meeting, "If you want our paradox, adopt our lifestyle, not just our wine consumption."



Conclusion

- There is no evidence of the cardioprotective benefit of low alcohol consumption
- There is very strong evidence of the extra-cardiovascular risk of low alcohol consumption
- Hypertension specialists should advise the lowest possible alcohol consumption
- Encouraging the French lifestyle may be a good idea, but the French lifestyle is not only wine or alcohol

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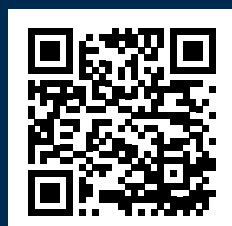
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