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Dr Dominique Florin
Editor

modelling approach to alcohol use, which aims to capture the complexity of individual decision making around alcohol consumption in different policy contexts. This is potentially a novel and important way to assess the value of different approaches to reducing alcohol-related health harm.

2025 MCA Alcohol and Health Symposium

In November last year we held our annual Alcohol and Health Symposium at the Royal College of Physicians in London. It was an excellent day with a focus on alcohol in the workplace. As usual there was plenty of time for audience interaction and networking which was much valued. The Max Glatt lecture was given by Professor Ed Day. This was an inspiring account of the way in which a focus on recovery has been central to his career in the alcohol and health field. Delegate feedback for the day was extremely positive. The talks are available to view through the MCA website for 6 months for those who have paid the delegate fee; Professor Day’s talk is available to all alongside all previous Max Glatt lectures going back to 2013. In this issue of Alcoholis you can see some photos giving a flavour of the event last year.

Medical Schools project

The MCA is currently planning a new project to survey teaching on alcohol-related health harm in UK medical schools, with a view to using these data to inform future

From the Editor

Welcome to the first 2026 issue of Alcoholis.

In this issue

Amber Copeland from Sheffield has written a fascinating piece looking at a computational

strategy and best practice. It is over 10 years since this was looked at systematically and, in that time, the medical school landscape has changed considerably, with many new medical schools opening.

MCA Competitions

The MCA ran two competitions last year, as part of our mission to promote the education of health professionals in training on alcohol-related health harm. The 2025 Essay Competition was on no/low alcohol and the winning essay has been published in the MCA Annual Report. The second competition was our NAAD Competition to produce a flyer on the theme of alcohol and cancer; the winning entries are published in this issue of Alcoholis. Prize winners from both competitions attended the MCA Symposium and were presented with their certificates.

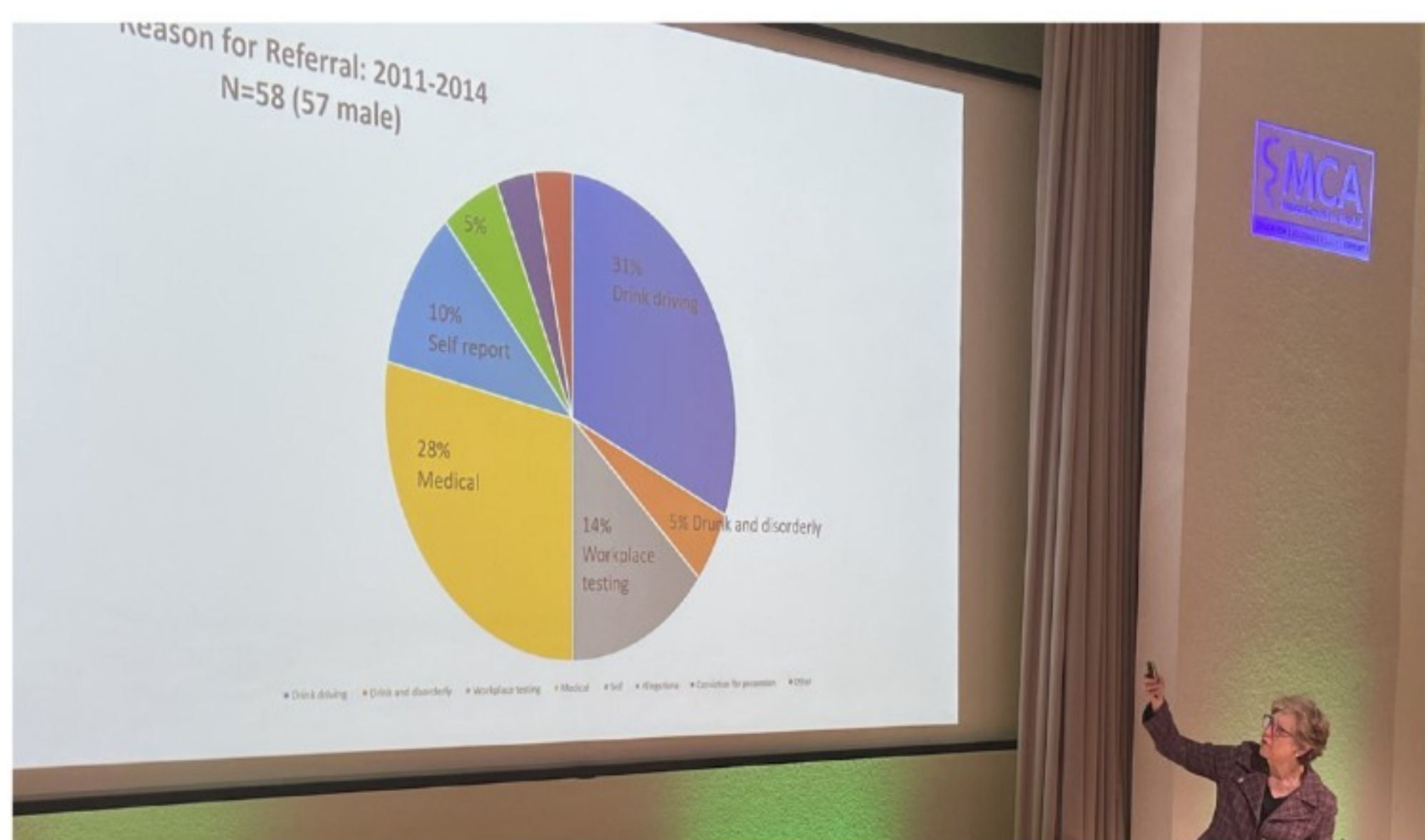
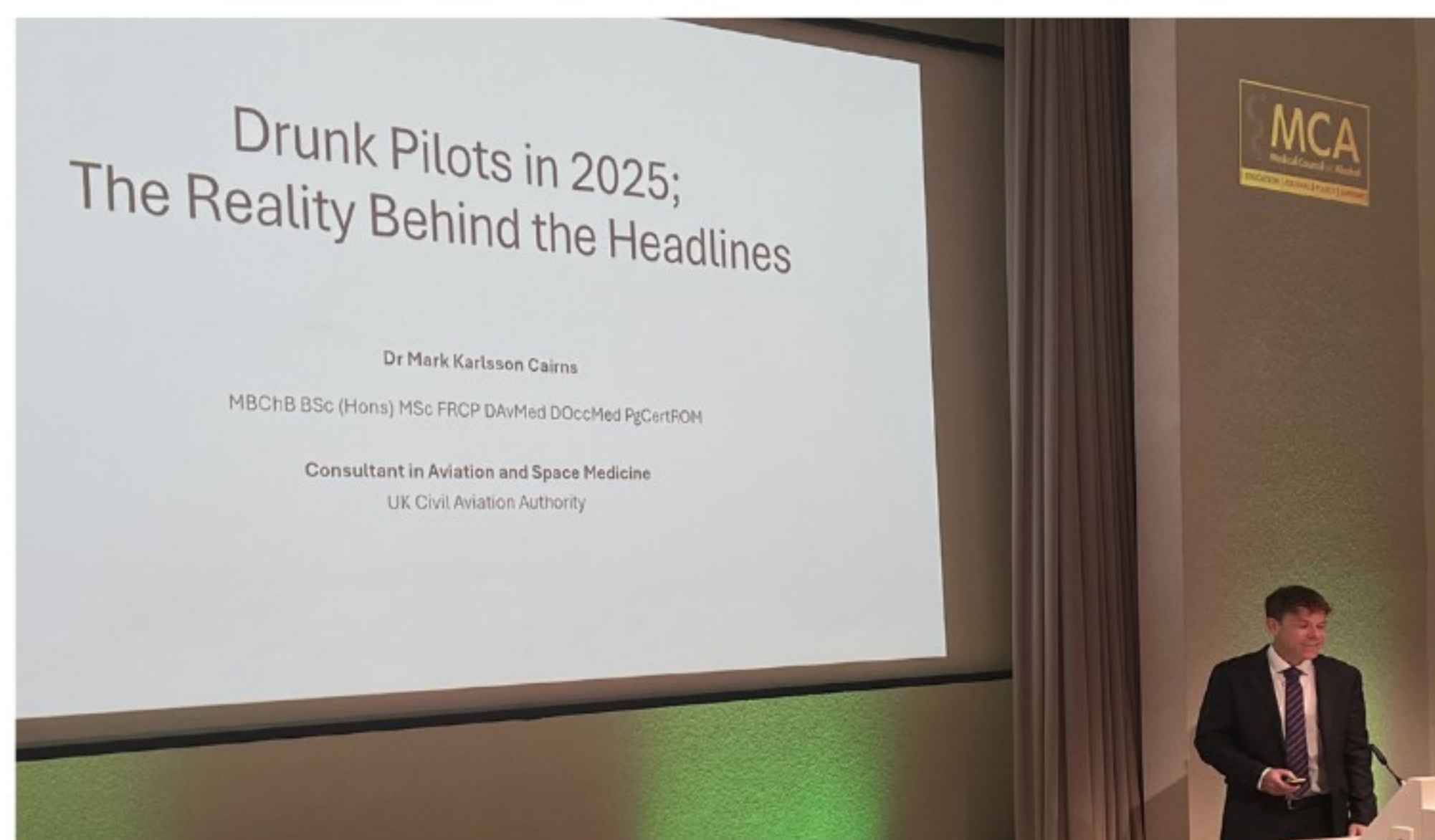
Two competitions will be run this year. The Essay Prize is currently open with details in this issue of Alcoholis, on the theme of Alcohol Dependence Syndrome. Later this year the QI competition open to postgraduate doctors in training will open. Any readers of this issue of Alcoholis please do pass on the details to relevant audiences, all the details are also available on the MCA website.

Save the date:

2026 MCA Symposium and Max Glatt lecture

The 2026 Symposium will be held in person at the RCP, London on 18th November. We are currently building the programme; as always the talks will be of relevance to clinicians and researchers across the disciplines working on alcohol and health. Please do **save the date** and look out for more details.

MCA Annual Symposium on Alcohol & Health 19 November 2025



Clockwise from top left: Dr David Fox / Dr Zaid Al-Najjar / Dr Mark Cairns / Q&A Panel: Chair Dr Jane Marshall, Dr Mark Cairns, Dr Nick Jenkins / Max Glatt Medal presentation to Professor Ed Day by Professor Colin Drummond / Max Glatt Lecture by Professor Ed Day / Dr Jane Marshall / Exhibitors Hall

Overleaf from left to right: Competition presentations by Professor Colin Drummond / 2nd prize (joint) Student Essay: Josiah Wilson / 2nd prize (joint) Student Essay: Juliana Louw / 1st prize NAAD Competition: Mark Thomas



2026 MCA Essay Competition

In 1976 Edwards and Gross described a new clinical syndrome of Alcohol Dependence.

Fifty years later, how relevant and useful is the concept of the Alcohol Dependence Syndrome to the diagnosis and clinical management of alcohol-related health harm?

Entrants must submit a maximum 3,000 word essay referenced in the Vancouver style to address the topic. The word count does not include references, diagrams and tables. Entrants must be current medical students in the United Kingdom.

To apply visit: m-c-a.org.uk/education

The winning essays will receive:

1st Prize	£750
2nd Prize	£500
3rd Prize	£300

2026 MCA Quality Improvement Prize

This competition is open to all resident doctors in any specialty working in the UK, in any non-consultant training grade. You should report a completed audit, clinical governance or quality improvement project on an alcohol-related health harm topic and reflect current best practice guidelines/evidence.

The topic can reflect the full range of interventions from prevention to detection to treatment. Please submit your entry as one A3 size poster in a structured abstract format describing a Quality Improvement project.

To apply visit: m-c-a.org.uk/education

Winning entrants receive:

1st Prize	£750
2nd Prize	£500
3rd Prize	£300



Opening date: 1 January 2026

Closing date: 1 May 2026

Opening date: 1 March 2026

Closing date: 31 July 2026

Capturing Context: Building a New Computational Model of Alcohol Use

Dr Amber Copeland, Wellcome Research Fellow, School of Medicine and Population Health, University of Sheffield

Alcohol-specific deaths in the UK have increased by 42% since 2019, reaching record levels. In England alone, over 10 million people drink at levels that place them at increased risk of harm, contributing to around 950,000 alcohol-related hospital admissions each year. Overall, alcohol-related harms cost England an estimated £27.4 billion annually, including £4.9 billion in direct costs to the NHS (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2024).

Despite this, many people who drink at high-risk levels want to cut down, but most find it difficult to do so (Beard et al., 2017; de Vocht et al., 2016).

The Role of Context

Contextual factors, such as where people are and who they are with (Holmes et al., 2024), may make it challenging for people “in-the-moment” to act in accordance with their motivations.

Imagine this scenario: Sarah decides she doesn’t want to drink alcohol that evening. Later, her friends tell her they are planning to go for drinks, and that these will take place at her favourite pub. She had planned to go to the gym instead, but it closes early, so that option is no longer available. Faced with these circumstances, Sarah may end up drinking alcohol, despite her earlier intention not to.

Examples like this are common, yet traditional approaches to understanding alcohol use often struggle to capture how such moment-to-moment decisions unfold.

Understanding How Decisions Unfold in Real Time

In recent years, alcohol researchers have begun using computational models to better understand how people make decisions in real time. One approach is the drift-diffusion model (Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008) which treats decision-making as a process where evidence accumulates in favour of one option over another until it reaches a threshold, at which point a choice is made.

In one study (Copeland et al., 2024), we recruited 36 regular drinkers (>14 UK units per week) and showed them short videos designed to change how they value alcohol: one highlighted positive outcomes of drinking (e.g., socialising with friends), while the other showed negative outcomes (e.g., vomiting and violence). After each video, participants completed a decision-making task where they chose their preferred option from pairs of previously rated drink images (either two alcoholic or two non-alcoholic drinks) across multiple trials. Their choices and response times provided the behavioural data needed for the drift-diffusion model to estimate underlying decision-making processes. To our surprise, findings showed that changing the value of alcohol didn’t affect people’s decisions about alcohol, but it did affect decisions that weren’t about alcohol. When primed to see alcohol negatively, participants accumulated evidence more strongly in favour of non-alcoholic drinks, meaning they were more likely to choose this option. These findings align with behavioural economic models of addiction which emphasise the importance of alternatives to alcohol, as well as the value people place on alcohol itself (Acuff et al., 2023).

However, while this work helps us to understand decisions as they unfold in controlled experimental settings, it leaves an important question unanswered: how do these moment-to-moment choices play out across different real-world contexts, and how do they accumulate over time?

From Laboratory Experiments to the Real World

To address this gap, in our new interdisciplinary project we are integrating two computational models never before combined in public health research: the drift-diffusion model described above (Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008) and agent-based modelling, which examines how individual-level behaviours and interactions result in population-level trends (Epstein, 1999).

Agent-based models simulate people (“agents”), their behaviours, and how they interact with each other and their environment (Buckley et al., 2022). These models are particularly well suited to studying complex behaviours, such as alcohol use, because they can represent influences operating at the individual, social, and population levels simultaneously. Importantly, they capture patterns of behaviour that emerge from interactions between individuals and their environments, and that are not obvious when studying individuals in isolation.

By integrating these two complementary computational approaches, we will link moment-to-moment, context-sensitive alcohol-related decisions with the emergence of population-level patterns of drinking behaviour over longer periods of time.

One way to think about this is that we will create thousands of virtual “Sarahs”. Each has different preferences, social networks, and environments. Each encounters different situations and makes decisions repeatedly over days, months, and years. By observing these virtual lives, we can explore how context shapes the drinking behaviours of individuals and populations in ways that are difficult (or practically impossible) to study directly.

Why This Approach Matters

This modelling approach offers several advantages for alcohol research.

First, alcohol use is highly variable: people differ from one another, and even the same person may drink very differently across time and contexts (Perski et al., 2025). Traditional methods often struggle with this complexity. Computational models, by contrast, are designed to handle such non-linear and individual-specific patterns.

Second, translating theories into computer code forces precision (Guest & Martin, 2021). Instead of relying solely on verbal explanations, we must specify exactly how different mechanisms operate and interact. This makes it easier to test assumptions, refine theories, and generate new hypotheses.

Finally, by simulating how drinking behaviour changes in response to different interventions, this approach enables us to explore “what if?” scenarios that would be impractical or costly to test in the real world, helping to inform evidence-based policy.

Implications for Alcohol Policy

Some alcohol policies are already thought to have the potential to reduce harm. But how our project goes further is that we can simulate the potential effects of novel policies prior to them being implemented. This includes exploring not only how new policies lead to immediate changes in moment-to-moment decision-making, but also how they affect longer-term patterns of alcohol use across years or even decades. Importantly, our project will bring together viewpoints from a range of stakeholders to ensure that policies we examine are timely and relevant.

The model can also be used to explore whether policies affect groups differently. With demographic data, we can examine whether interventions have unequal impacts across communities with different levels of advantage, helping to identify policies that reduce, rather than widen, health inequalities.

The model we build and our interest in alternatives to alcohol may also shed light on the potential benefits of broader initiatives aimed at improving human health, such as social prescribing (Woodall et al., 2018), which seeks to increase access to meaningful alternative activities in people’s everyday environments. While not designed specifically to reduce alcohol use, such schemes have already been associated with reductions in GP consultations (28%) and A&E attendances (24%). Given the scale of alcohol-related harm in England, even modest indirect effects could translate into substantial health and economic benefits.

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2025 Competitions: Winners

MCA Student Essay Competition 2025

No and Low Alcohol products - solution or contributor to alcohol-related harms?

- 1st Prize: Lucy Pringle, University of Glasgow
- Joint 2nd Prize: Juliana Louw, University of Oxford
- Radu Polschi, University College London
- Josiah Wilson, University of Liverpool

MCA NAAD Competition 2025

Design an artwork and supporting infographic on the relationship between alcohol and cancer which could be used for information in healthcare or other settings, destined at the general public.

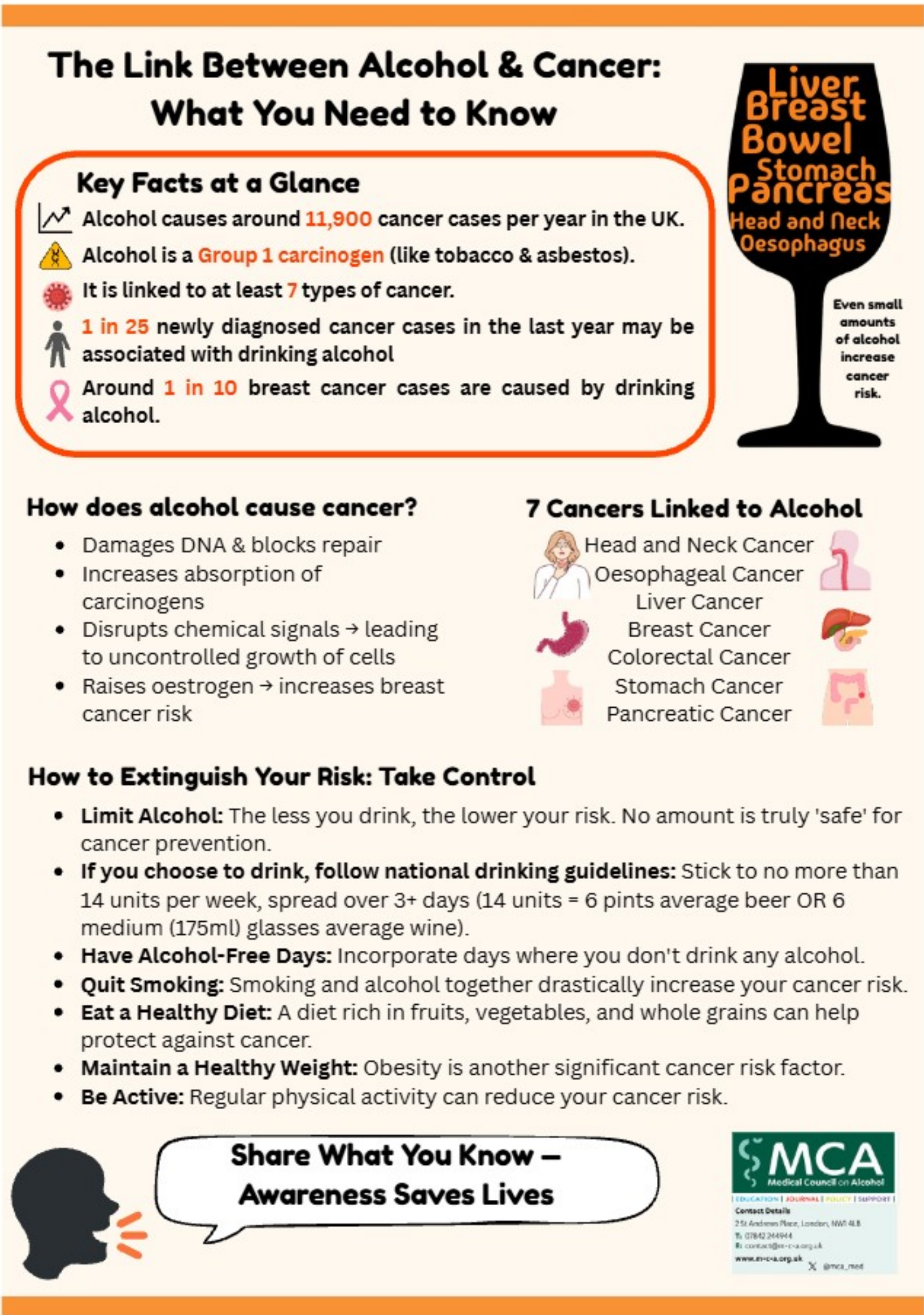
- 1st Prize: Mark Thomas, University of Manchester
- 2nd Prize: Krishnika Vetrivel, King’s College London
- 3rd Prize: Kashmir Gaddu, University of Leicester

MCA NAAD Competition 2025 Winners

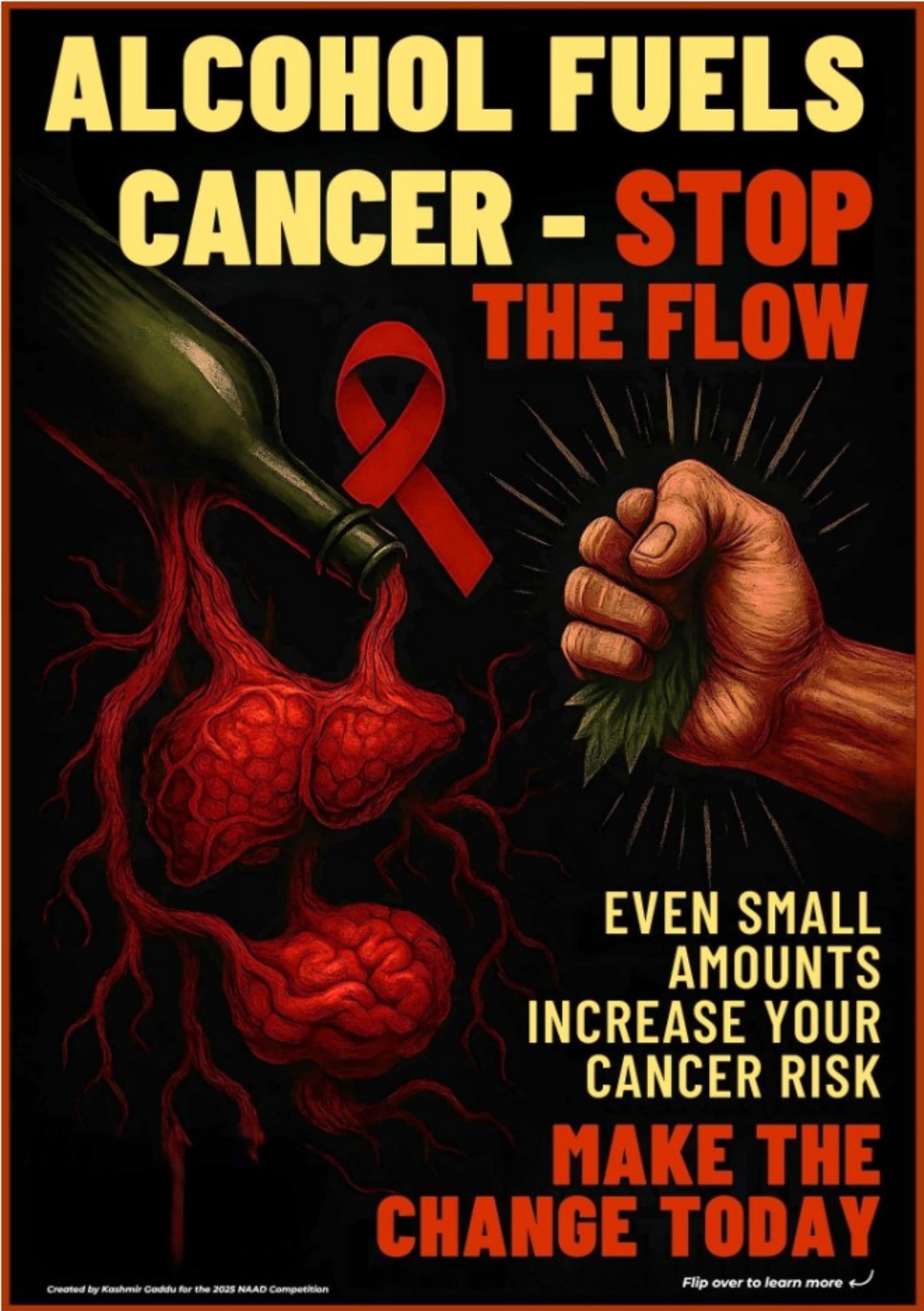
1st Prize: Mark Thomas



2nd Prize: Krishnika Vetrivel



3rd Prize: Kashmir Gaddu



SAVE THE DATE:

MCA 2026 Annual Symposium on Alcohol & Health

The MCA 2026 Annual Symposium on Alcohol & Health will take place on **Wednesday 18th November 2026** at the RCP, London. Please do **save the date** and look out for more details.



MCA

Medical Council on Alcohol

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