

The Reply

We thank Rehm and Lachenmeier for their insightful comments. The World Health Organization (WHO) definition of unrecorded alcohol does not solely encompass moonshine, but also includes other forms of alcohol, including smuggled alcohol and surrogate alcohol. Therefore, perhaps we should have defined moonshine in a broader sense, to encompass unrecorded alcohol that is either homemade or industrially produced. However, our intent in citing the WHO estimate was not to imply that the majority of unrecorded alcohol is contaminated with lead, but rather to suggest that a significant percentage of global alcohol consumption derives from illegally produced alcohol, which carries a higher risk for impurities. We agree that precise numbers for moonshine consumption globally are unavailable. However, it is likely that the current WHO approximation for prevalence of unrecorded alcohol (29%) is an underestimate, because consumer surveys assessing alcohol consumption significantly underestimate both recorded and unrecorded alcohol intake.^{1,2} Moreover, most current surveys tend not to account for alcohol from populous areas such as Africa, where nearly half of all alcohol consumed is illegal.³

While Rehm and Lachenmeier suggest that the majority of unrecorded alcohol has not been associated with lead poisoning, few studies have measured lead levels in alcohol. A recent study⁴ analyzing recorded and unrecorded alcohol products from eastern Ukraine found that about 7% of moonshine samples made mostly for personal consumption contained excessive amounts of lead. These risks may, of course, be regional. We also draw attention to the article by Morgan et al,⁵ which suggests that moonshine contains significant amounts of lead.

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We agree with Rehm and Lachenmeier that saturnine gout is likely not a major public health problem at this time. However, we do not agree with the implication that the problem is trivial. We respectfully disagree with our colleagues' assertion that inquiries about moonshine consumption "may not be recommended." Because alcohol (independent of lead contamination) is a risk factor for development of gout,⁶ it is necessary to inquire about consumption of alcohol (illegal or not) among gout patients. And because lead toxicity is a treatable illness, inquiry into the possibility of lead consumption among appropriate cohorts of gout patients provides an opportunity to intervene.

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