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May 1, 2020

The Honorable Diana DeGette  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2111 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Fred Upton  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2183 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Representatives DeGette and Upton:

I am writing today on behalf of the Research Society on Alcoholism (RSA) to thank you for your letter to House leadership calling for increased funding to support medical research in the next coronavirus relief package. As you are aware, closures due to the pandemic have had an adverse impact on federally funded research as laboratories and campuses have been forced to close. We greatly appreciate your support to help ensure valuable research will continue to benefit the health of all Americans.

RSA and its members are focused on applying research to identify solutions for problems associated with alcoholism, alcohol abuse, and alcohol-related diseases and conditions. Today, RSA serves as a meeting ground for scientists to promote the dissemination of scientific knowledge in the areas of basic science, risks and resiliency, education and prevention, treatment, outcome and recovery, and policy and economics. Our over 2,000 members represent the full spectrum of research professionals including postdoctoral fellows and student members.

As the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated, research is critical for the country to be prepared to respond to the next disease threat or public health crisis. However, research must continue on everyday conditions and threats that affect so many Americans' lives. Attached please find a statement from RSA on the importance of continued research in mental and behavioral health disorders including alcohol use disorder. As people face unprecedented times of uncertainty and anxiety during this pandemic, they may be more likely to engage in more disordered drinking behavior, particularly those already dealing with alcohol use issues. This underscores the importance of continuing to fund and support research to identify resources for those who may be struggling with alcohol use disorder or other stressors that may lead to increased alcohol consumption. To this end, some of the requested funds should be directed to the important work of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the National Institute on Mental Health.

Thank you again for your continued support of the scientific research community. I hope you will see RSA as both an ally and a resource in your effort to achieve additional funding. Please do not

hesitate to reach out to RSA if you have any questions or if there is any way we can provide further support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Swift". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "S".

Robert Swift, M.D., Ph.D.  
President  
Research Society on Alcoholism



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## **A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT INCREASED ALCOHOL SALES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The current environment of stay-at-home orders, quarantines, and self-isolation in response to COVID-19 is unprecedented. The natural stressors and anxieties that come with the pandemic and its consequences can cause people to engage in more disordered drinking behavior, particularly those already dealing with an alcohol use disorder. Robert Swift, M.D., Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>, President of the Research Society on Alcoholism (RSA)<sup>2</sup>, suggests that current stressors such as financial insecurity, health-related concerns, and the inability to access social supports including friends, family, and their faith communities may be associated with increased alcohol use in an effort to modulate stress levels. Unfortunately, increased alcohol use may be associated with increased tension among family members and greater potential risk to vulnerable populations.

While we lack the data to provide a clear picture of the effects of this current pandemic and alcohol use and its consequences, we do know that alcohol sales have increased since stay-at-home orders were issued. A recent Nielsen report states that alcohol sales were up 55% for the week ending March 21, 2020. When considered by type of alcohol beverage, spirits sales increased 75%, wine was up 66%, and beer sales increased by 42%. Online alcohol sales increased 243%.<sup>3</sup> These increases are noteworthy and draw attention to secondary consequences of “safer-at-home” policies. A portion of these increases may reflect shifts in drinking environments—e.g. access to restaurants and bars is significantly constrained. Substantial numbers of drinkers are using alternative sources such as the on-line delivery with many conducting virtual social hours/happy hours or dinner and drinks from their homes and backyards. A survey by Alcohol.org found one-fifth of surveyed workers reported stockpiling alcohol for self-isolation.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, in some locations, alcohol-package/liquor stores are categorized as essential businesses and have remained open. Furthermore, in certain locales, restaurants are permitted to offer cocktails/mixed drinks to be purchased for “pick up”. By ensuring the continuity of alcohol access, these practices may reduce the incidence of alcohol withdrawal. At the same time, they may enable, inadvertently, problematic drinking patterns. For persons with physical or mental health conditions, even moderate increases in typical drinking patterns can compromise medication efficacy and overall health.

Another factor driving these increases may be associated with the disruption of health care delivery. As an example, Dr. Swift cites individuals seeking treatment for substance use disorders, struggling to remain abstinent or reduce levels of harmful drinking. For many such people, services have transitioned from group or individual face-to-face therapy to telehealth efforts. Similarly, many mutual-help groups must limit their support to virtual group meetings. This lack of “personal” attention may be associated with increases in stress and feelings of isolation, which in turn may be associated with alcohol use.

All these factors point to the need to continue to study alcohol use patterns and its consequences. They also underscore the importance of continuing to fund and support resources to help those who may be struggling with an alcohol use disorder or other stressors that may lead to increased alcohol consumption. RSA and its members remain committed to studying and disseminating scientific knowledge on the basic science, risks and resiliency, education and prevention, treatment, outcome and recovery, and policy and economics of alcohol use disorders. Never has it been more important to focus on the physical and mental well-being of each individual as the country continues to work together to eliminate the threat of COVID-19.