In their recent article on the "reliability of alcohol intake as recalled from 10 years in the past," Liu et al. (1) compared alcohol consumption reported in the First National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES I, 1971–1975) with that reported in the NHANES I Epidemiologic Follow-up Study conducted 10 years later. Their description of questions on alcohol intake asked in NHANES I omitted the index (1) (2) that after question 18b on frequency of drinking, respondents were asked, "Which do you most frequently drink—beer, wine, or liquor?" (18c). The quantity question (18d) followed and asked, "When you drink (beer/wine/liquor), how much do you usually drink over 24 hours? [Enter an amount only for the one marked in 18c.]" Accordingly, their estimate of baseline alcohol consumption is based on a quantity-frequency (QF) measure in which the quantity represents the number of drinks respondents usually had of their favorite beverage (favored beverage QF), rather than the global QF measure used in the recall of drinking 10 years previously, which asked about the usual amount drunk when any alcoholic beverage was drunk.

The influence of this difference in the quantity questions on estimations of alcohol consumption was investigated in 1991 (3), using data from the New York State (NYS)-wide survey of alcohol and other drug use in which both beverage-specific and global QF questions had been asked. The NYS survey was conducted by telephone in a sample taken using random digit dialing techniques supplemented by samples of homeless people, college students, and individuals not having telephones (n = 6,364). Favored beverage estimations of mean daily alcohol consumption were based on the following: (drinking days per year X drinks per drinking day of beverage drunk)/(number of drinks respondents usually had of their favorite beverage, there is little evidence to suggest that it would have greatly affected categorization of baseline drinking in NHANES I.

Liu et al. found that heavy drinkers recalled having an average of 0.57 drinks per day less than they originally reported 10 years earlier. However, the present analysis suggests that using the favored beverage QF may overestimate original intake among heavy drinkers by as much as 1.02 drinks per day. If this potential overestimation is taken into consideration, it appears that heavy drinkers tended to recall drinking more per day than originally reported, rather than less.

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