

‘The Last Coachman’, the Trio of Risk Factors: Alcohol, Tobacco and Traffic Accidents



“O Último Cocheiro”, o Trio de Factores de Risco: Álcool, Tabaco e Acidentes de Viação

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Figure 1 - “O Último Cocheiro”, Severo Portela Júnior, 1931, Óleo sobre tela, 1000 x 985cm. Museu da Cidade de Lisboa, Palácio da Mitra. Fotógrafo: José Avelar.

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According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a 'coachman' is 'a man who drives a coach or a carriage'. The term 'coachman' may actually be applied to the driver of any type of coach, even in times before motor vehicles were in common use. A coachman would provide a public service, wearing clean outfits and politely addressing his customers and patrons.

The painting "The Last Coachman" was authored by the Portuguese artist Severo Portela Júnior, born in Coimbra, in 1898. He lived in Almodôvar, a village in the southern Alentejo region and died in Hospital Santa Maria, in Lisbon, in 1985. Severo Portela Júnior painted several typical aspects of the daily life and landscapes of Alentejo. His legacy has been kept and is represented in a number of Portuguese museums such as Museu Calouste Gulbenkian and Museu do Chiado.

In this representation of a coachman, some symbolic representations are identifiable through the image of a very well dressed man who is smoking and drinking, perhaps red wine, before or after his trip.

By coincidence, this painting from the last century combines three risk factors with an impact on current rates of morbidity and mortality: alcohol, tobacco and traffic accidents.¹

Excessive alcohol consumption is a major public health issue and has recently been updated by the World Health Organization.² Alcohol abuse contributes to more than 60 medical conditions, with chronic liver diseases (e.g., cirrhosis) and traffic accidents at the top of the list. There is robust scientific evidence supporting a causal relationship between alcohol consumption and these two conditions, identifying them as major causes for years of potential life lost.^{3,4} Binge drinking in young people is also a major issue⁵ and before the age of 18 increases the risk of future dependence, sexually transmitted diseases, traffic accidents, suicide and sudden death.⁶

Tobacco is also a major risk factor for mortality resulting from lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases,

cardiovascular and cerebrovascular events. There has been a strong public commitment to reduce smoking habits worldwide, through several kinds of interventions namely law enforcement, control of publicity, prohibition of smoking in public spaces, among others. However, the need remains for some smoking regulations to be suitably addressed, such as those regarding electronic cigarettes⁷ and the implementation of plain packages.⁸

The motorization of our society constitutes a cultural, industrial and socio-economic reality. Car transportation has changed our societies at a huge cost, as one of the major causes of mortality and morbidity is related to traffic accidents. The main factor behind this scenario is the human factor, exemplified by speed excess, alcohol and driving and lack of law enforcement.⁹ Driving slowly saves lives!

In conclusion, these risk factors have been part of our lifestyle, of our so called modern culture. It is imperative that we oppose them and we should rather drive slowly and walk faster (as physical inactivity is also pandemic),¹⁰ drink less quantities of alcohol - one to two drinks a day - and quit smoking. Some of these risk factors of morbidity and mortality have been around for decades and are priority issues that impact health worldwide. It therefore seems fair to ask: does the world also need law enforcement for this trio?

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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