

I was an alcoholic GP drinking three bottles of wine a night

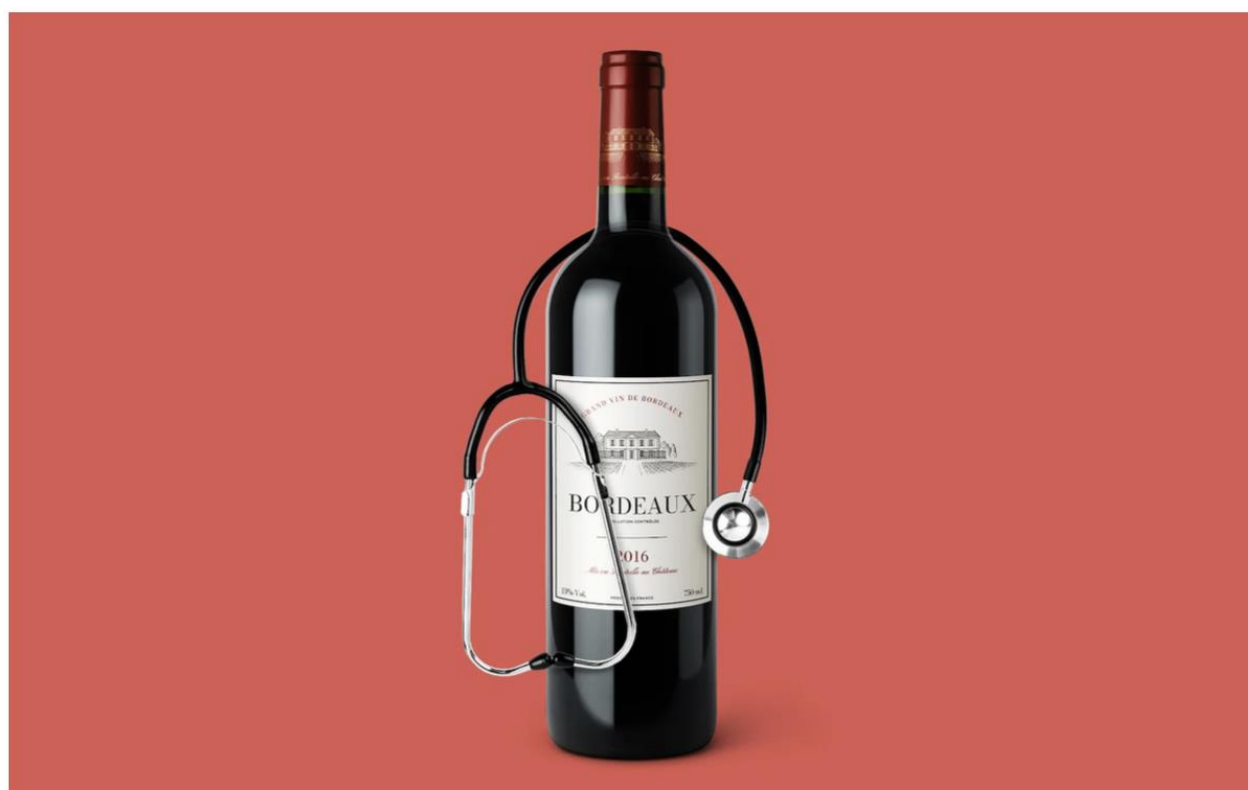
Whilst telling patients to stick to 14 units a week, I was secretly consuming more than 100 myself...



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'My work as a GP frequently included helping patients with addictions – the irony'

Anonymous

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I always dedicated a level of ritual to my drinking – a long-stem glass, a hearty sniff, a swill of the liquid and first sip – as if that somehow made my habit as palatable as the fine wine I was savouring. Swigging from the bottle was something [alcoholics](#) did, not me. Not this doctor.

I never bought [wine](#) in bulk (knowing full well I'd consume it too fast). Instead, I shopped at local stores (note the plural) and prided myself on my great relationship with the sellers, who would buy in my favourites – shiraz normally, but margaux if I could get it – knowing which days I'd be in.

On my worst nights, when I was not working the next day, I could get through up to three bottles. That's 30 units of alcohol, more than double [the recommended units](#) for an entire week. And however much I tried to imagine I was a "classy" drinker, those [anxiety-ridden nights](#) tossing and turning, sometimes banking just one hour of sleep, were hardly sophisticated. I'd wake feeling shattered, shaky – and panic-struck.

On evenings before work, I'd be careful to consume enough to ward off the shakes but never enough to be detectable the next day. A handheld alcohol monitor I used made sure I was safe to drive and see patients, but that added stress of self-checking also ramped up [the likelihood I'd binge](#) once I'd survived the day.

Alcohol entirely controlled my life. My work as a GP frequently included helping patients with addictions – the irony.

In particular, one patient I'd got to know well had managed to successfully beat cancer. The biggest tragedy was that he couldn't quit booze and so (after many hours of me hypocritically saying he was "killing himself with wine") I lost him to liver failure. My heart felt broken about his death – yet it never stopped me from going home and killing *myself* with wine.

Growing up and feeling different

I'd decided to be a doctor aged just eight, around the same time I knew I was gay. Growing up in a loving, northern and working-class family, masculinity was highly prized. Evenings "down the pub" were about who could drink the most, who could "handle it" best. While I only feigned interest in sports, booze was something I could genuinely – enthusiastically – fit in with.

At 18, I became the first in my family to go to university, choosing a medical school far away to escape the macho culture. As a student I felt comfortable coming out, finally.

Luckily for me, being honest about my sexuality was a positive experience (in the early 1990s, that wasn't a given). But while that relief felt immense, by then drinking was ingrained in who I was. Wednesday afternoons were technically for sports, but I'd be in the pub instead. Thursday pound-a-pint nights might see me put away eight jars. Drinking to excess had no next-morning repercussions at that age.

Then, as a junior doctor, I'd have a drink or two on working days, but before any day off, a bottle of wine would merely start the night.

A marriage from hell

At 35, in the early days of dating apps, that's where I met my husband, Rich*. We were very different, but it felt sparky and edgy that our personalities clashed. We had a big fancy wedding in 2014 with our families. But two or three years into the marriage, Rich's [narcissism and subtly controlling behaviour](#) began. Little comments to [undermine my confidence](#). I'd tell Rich a medical fact, and he'd immediately find something online to argue with me about. He criticised my weight, my taste in clothes, how I cooked.

At home I felt worthless, but I shone in my career, working in both the community and in hospital. Patients and colleagues gave me great feedback, which annoyed him, as did the fact I was earning more. We drank together – heavily – to try to mask our failing marriage.

When my drinking escalated

During lockdown, my drinking got especially bad. Work was relentless, colleagues kept getting sick, some days there was just so much death, including of young people. It was a harrowing time, and when I'd get home, there was always Rich, working remotely. With no escape, I'd pour my first glass at six o'clock and keep going until I collapsed into bed.

As being a doctor was a lifelong dream, I never worked drunk or compromised my patients. But I realise I'm kidding myself if I thought drinking nearly 30 units, four times a week, was having no effect physically and mentally, at home and at work.

My [skin was bad](#), and I'd gained four or five stone in a year. I felt dreadful in the mornings and suffered from anxiety and depression. All while shamefully asking patients about their own drinking.

Most people underestimate their intake, some people protest too much, and you can spot the jitters, and the reticence to answer questions about drink.

Drinking through divorce

My doomed marriage eventually ended towards the end of 2022. There wasn't a single final straw. It was a gradual realisation that [my life had become entirely about him](#). I left him the house and moved into rented accommodation. I didn't want to fight. I just wanted out.

But even after making that move, I didn't feel free. I'd left my marriage to improve my life and ended up in a pit of self-pity, drinking as much as ever. I'd seen it happen to patients too many times – alcohol becoming the problem that eventually killed them. I knew that was where I was heading.

So I tried self-help books, Dry January, Sober October. I'd last a week, maybe two, and then go back to drinking.

The thing that finally made me stop killing myself? Actually, it was reading about [another GP in *The Telegraph*](#) whose life had deteriorated because of alcohol. I thought: this is me. I saw how *Just the Tonic*, an online programme, had helped the other doctor and hoped it might save me. I did not want to be dead in midlife.

It wasn't cheap, but I thought about my career. I'm 50 now, my retirement age is 67. I could earn hundreds of thousands in that time. If I lost it all to alcohol, how expensive would that be? Plus, I've grafted hard to earn a great wage, thank you – the cost was justified.

What worked for me

Doing an online course appealed, as I dreaded joining a local support group and bumping into patients. There's a special stigma for doctors who drink. We're expected to behave better. Yet the pressure we're under now is unprecedented. I imagine there are many more doctors like me, all covering up their dirty habits as I had. While there are great mental health support systems in place for NHS professionals, as you might imagine they are woefully underfunded, with (you guessed it) long waiting lists.

The course didn't even require me to stop drinking for the first seven weeks. As an alcoholic, this felt reassuring. I knew from experience going cold turkey had failed. With support I learnt to drink mindfully, asking myself first: is this glass of wine actually helping? And the answer was always "No".

There were setbacks, nights where it went wrong, but they became fewer over those weeks. The drinking nights became more spaced out. I appreciated the dry ones more and more. Significantly, it was also the first time I'd ever talked openly about my drinking to anyone else. Having a safe space to do that was in itself a weight lifted.

Now, I've achieved over six months alcohol-free and I feel brilliant. My self-esteem and confidence have vastly improved. My friendships are better, my work is better, I'm more present, I'm ready for dating and being sexually active again. I've saved so much money that I'm looking for a new car to celebrate being sober. I wake up in the morning looking forward to the day. I can look patients in the eye when discussing alcohol and not feel ashamed and full of self-loathing.

At 50, I feel like I did at 25 again. I feel like myself again. For the first time in years, I feel proud of the person I really am, the doctor I always longed to be.

As told to Susanna Galton

**Name has been changed*