

AUSTRALIA'S DRUG ADDICTION: Our Boozing, Brawling Culture Kathleen Morris

Last year, New South Wales Health reported a 59 per cent increase in alcohol-related admissions to hospitals between 2000 and 2007 with 40,000 people now being admitted annually.¹ The Morgan Poll also reported that year that almost 20 per cent of Australians had been victims of alcohol related violence or knew someone who had.² And four months ago a Galaxy Survey found that 80 per cent of Australians think we drink too much and 85 per cent think more needs to be done to reduce alcohol related injuries and deaths.³ All of these statistics point to one thing: Australia is addicted to the toxic drug ethanol and needs help. Historically, an illusion that 'drunkenness is just Aussieness' has stymied efforts to reform laws relating to alcohol consumption. Thankfully, with increasing awareness about the health hazards of frequent and excessive consumption, alcohol is now attaining a new, more realistic, more sinister image. But to what extent are we really prepared to accept responsibility for our actions and reverse the stereotype that the Australian culture is a boozing, brawling one?

Our history of dealing with our binging, drunken culture has been to shift the blame onto anyone or anything except ourselves. We blame 'ready-to-drink' products for the rise in teen drinking (that the big alcohol industry is enticing them with 'pretty colours'⁴), and we blame alcohol sponsorship of sport for our boozing culture (that we're being lead astray with poor role models and VB symbols on Ricky Ponting's chest). Of course, these influences can be significant, but to ascribe full fault to them is simplistic. The core issue is the lack of responsibility we as a society, and as individuals, take for the example we set.

What we fail to recognise in Australia is that alcohol is a drug. It is a toxin that kills and destroys lives. Statistics show that more teenagers die from the effects of alcohol than any other drug.⁵ On average, Australians consume almost 10 litres of pure alcohol each year.⁶ As a nation we are addicted to alcohol. We see it as an essential element for a good time. This was shown recently in an article describing 'Uncle Alcohol' as 'the favourite relative who arrives for the weekend to show everyone a good time.'⁷ We don't see the harm alcohol brings. Not until it is too late. The time has come to reveal that harsh truth.

The government should play an active role in changing the culture associated with drinking. Targeting our hip-pockets is essential but needs to be done through initiatives that will reduce consumption rather than ones that merely shift drinkers on to other products. One such initiative is to implement volumetric taxation on alcohol—the higher the content of alcohol, the higher the tax placed on it. Not only would this get rid of the absurd system of taxation currently in place—

¹ 'Booze puts 40,000 in hospital a year' <www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,24414165-421,00.html> (accessed 24 August 2009), September 2008

² Katelyn John, 'Parents' plea to stop drink violence' <www.news.com.au/story/0,23543390-1702,00.html> (accessed 24 August 2009), April 2008

³ Xanthe Kleinig, 'Binge drinking "a problem" says Australians' <www.news.com.au/story/0,,25452633-421,00.html> (accessed 24 August 2009), May 2009; 'Australians say nation has a drinking problem' <www.news.com.au/story/0,,25451997-1702,00.html> (accessed 24 August 2009), May 2009

⁴ Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, *National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009*, Canberra, 2006

⁵ Today, 'Binge drinking epidemic' <www.today.ninemsn.com/article.aspx?id=389689> (accessed 24 August 2009), March 2008

⁶ Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, *National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009*, Canberra, 2006

⁷ Tony Squires, 'Raising the Bar', Sunday Life, August 2009

irregularities such as a cask of wine attracting a tax of 6c/standard drink while a bottle attracts a tax of 36c/standard drink despite the strength of alcohol being the same;⁸ it would also encourage a shift to lower strength products because they would be comparatively cheaper. Using price in this way has proven highly effective in changing consumers' buying habits.⁹

There also needs to be a closer look at the factors underlying our attraction to alcohol—what makes us 'need to escape' or associates drunkenness with 'good times'. There is evidence that trends in risky drinking behaviour reflect broader socio-economic and structural issues in Australian society, highlighting the imperative of ensuring that services are provided to those who need them most – services related to healthcare, welfare and employment, among others. At the same time these services must not be purely focused in areas of lower socio-economic status as all levels of society are affected by alcohol related health problems (it is not just the 'working man's curse'). We should also strive to reduce the stigma surrounding the use of these services, which will reduce reluctance to admit drinking problems and seek assistance. One important step, perhaps, is to set up drinking hotlines (similar to the gambling and smoking hotlines that have proven highly effective) to encourage people to address their risky behaviours, and to require drink coasters and product labels to print warnings and the hotline number (the small 'drink responsibly' logo is neither sufficient nor on every product).

Other policy suggestions such as raising the legal drinking age have not been popular, and given the number of underage drinkers currently—at least 506,000 between the ages of 12-17 according to a 2005 survey¹⁰ — it seems clear that raising the age to 21 would only see more underage drinkers and therefore achieve little. The other major proposal is to ban advertising of alcohol. It is true that advertising is a factor in encouraging drinking, but social peer pressure and our cultural normalisation of drinking are equally or more substantial inducements. A better initiative would be to further: expand the government's 'drinkwise' program¹¹ into schools and homes, emphasising the danger this addictive drug presents and tackling insidious causes such as peer pressure and normalisation. Education is an essential step in tackling this engrained feature of society and removing misguided thoughts that consuming 40-50 standard alcoholic drinks per week (or more) is 'healthy'.¹² However, such education is seriously lacking, with recent Roy Morgan research showing that 12 million Australians were unaware of new national guidelines regarding teenage drinking¹³. This must change.

Cultural change is one of the hardest policy initiatives to put into place, plan for or achieve. However it can be done. We've seen it happen here in Australia—one example being our shift from considering smoking socially acceptable to banning it in most public places. What won't help achieve it is restricting policy to just one area or shifting blame away from ourselves onto the alcohol or advertising industry. It is a complex issue and requires a multifaceted approach. We need to reassess what we consider to be 'culturally acceptable', see alcohol for what it truly is — a dangerous and addictive drug — and take personal responsibility for the example we set and the reaction we have to binge drinking/excessive drinking friends and family.

⁸ 'Tax booze on strength, says campaigners' <www.news.com.au/story/0,24106028-1702.00.html> (accessed 24 August 2009), June 2008

⁹ Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, *The Prevention of Substance Use, Risk and Harm in Australia - a review of the evidence*, Canberra, 2004

¹⁰ 'Underage drinking rates "alarming"' <www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/wellbeing/underage-drinking-rates-alarming-20090407-9y1t.html> (accessed 24 August 2009), November 2008

¹¹ DrinkWise Australia <www.drinkwise.com.au> (accessed 25 August 2009), 2009

¹² Sarina Lewis, 'Raising the Bar', Sunday Life, August 2009

¹³ 'Survey reveals scale of under-age drinking' <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/survey-reveals-scale-of-underage-drinking-20090907-fd8y.html>> (accessed 7 September 2009), September 2009

- Almost two thirds of all alcohol consumed in Australia is consumed at levels that are risky or of a high risk for short term harm
- Four Australians under 25 die due to alcohol-related injuries in an average week.
- On average, one in four hospitalisations of people aged between 15 and 24 happen as a result of alcohol.

Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, *National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009*, Canberra, 2006
Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging, *Binge Drinking Summit*, Melbourne, 2009

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