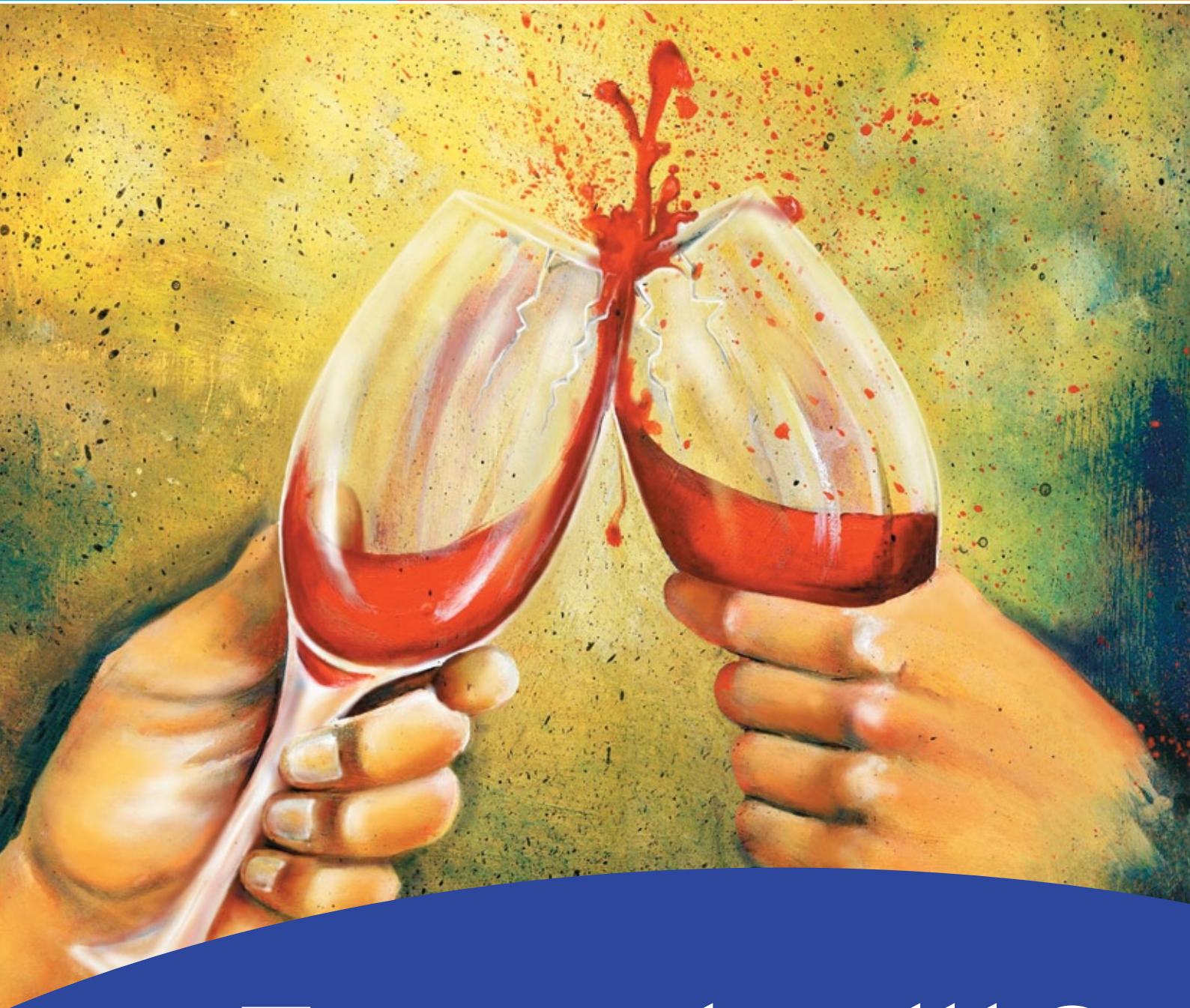


VicHealth

LETTER

Issue No. 31 Summer 2007



To your health?

Exploring what's safe, sensible and social

Samantha drinks
BINGE LAGER.



Emma drinks
BINGE CREEK CHARDONNAY.



FIONA drinks
OLD BINGE whisky.



They drink together
at the BINGE BAR.
Season's greetings to
Samantha, Emma and
FIONA.



Leunig

Cartoon with permission: LEUNIG

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to your health?

Homer Simpson has the unnerving capacity to get to the heart of society's contemporary dilemmas. "Here's to alcohol," he enthuses, "the cause of, and answer to, all of life's problems."



Alcohol is entrenched in our society: we use it to celebrate, commiserate, relax and socialise. However alcohol is an all too common companion of violence and injury, unsafe sex, verbal abuse, crime, poor mental health, drug use, car smashes and workplace absenteeism.

It seems the harms of alcohol are accelerating with a proliferation of

late night liquor licences and extensive promotion of alcohol – particularly those most popular with kids. Today, we have highest levels of risky drinking among young people in the past 20 years.

Last month Premier Brumby described alcohol as being 'the biggest social issue facing Victoria, and one of the biggest threats to young Victorians.'

His statement is significant – we can't begin to fix the problems posed by alcohol until there is a genuine acknowledgment that *there is* a problem. That won't be easy – after all alcohol features in most of our societal rituals and those who choose not to drink alcohol are viewed with some curiosity.

The marketing success of alcohol also gives us some insights into addressing this challenge. Marketing theorists developed the 'four Ps' approach to frame successful marketing strategies – price, product, place and promotion. Using these as a guide, we can start to intuitively see ways to tackle the alcohol problem.

Price – the products that cause the most harm should be the most expensive, via government levies and/or taxes.

Place – the number of places, and particularly late night venues, that supply alcohol should be limited and closely monitored.

Promotion – the promotion of alcohol products, especially those most popular with kids such as ready-to-drink products, should be restricted and independently regulated; and messages promoting alcohol to younger markets should be replaced with health-promoting messages on safer drinking.

Product – the alcohol content, flavouring, colouring, labelling, and packaging of products should conform to agreed standards that prevent the production of drinks that promote risky/high-risk consumption or have appeal to kids.

Such a multi-pronged strategy will need sustained commitment from local, State and Federal Governments, and the support of community organisations, workplaces, and researchers. The urgency of this cannot be stressed enough. As a WHO report on alcohol reminds us: 'the difference between good and bad alcohol policy is not an abstraction, but very often a matter of life and death.'¹

In this issue we begin to explore what 'safe, sensible and social' can be in the face of some very serious challenges.

Cheers?

TODD HARPER
Chief Executive Officer
Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

1. Babor et al 2003, *Alcohol: No ordinary Commodity*, World Health Organization.

It's time to tackle our UNHEALTHY drinking culture

Drinking is glamorous, sexy and sporty. It is how Australians have a good time, whether celebrating birthdays, sporting victories or the end of the working week.

This, at least, is the image promoted by most alcohol advertising and marketing.

In the real world, however, police, emergency service workers and health professionals have a very different understanding of the impact of the Australian way of drinking. They tell stories about teenage girls asking for the morning after pill after another night they can't remember, of young men smashed inside their cars, of fights outside pubs, and of younger and younger adults showing signs of addiction to alcohol.

These are just some of the more obvious symptoms of Australia's drinking problem. While few are questioning the right of adults to enjoy alcohol in

moderation, there is a growing chorus of alarm about the impact of excessive drinking, especially among vulnerable groups such as teenagers.

Concerns are being raised across many sections of society, from worried parents to medical experts alarmed by increasing rates of alcohol-related hospitalisations, and they are also reflected in growing media coverage of such problems.

Violence related to excessive consumption is a major factor driving concern, with 22% of respondents to the 2004 National Household Drug Survey saying they'd been verbally abused in the past year by someone affected by alcohol.

For Victoria Police, reducing the level of alcohol-related harm is a top priority. "It's as important as drugs and organised crime," says the Deputy Commissioner, Mr Kieran Walshe. "Alcohol is a significant cause of crime and anti-social activity and we need to take steps to try and curb it."

Mr Walshe cites figures showing that more than 7500 people are admitted to Australian hospitals because of alcohol-related assaults and that alcohol is involved in more than 100 murders annually.

"Some research estimates that as many as 80% of calls for police assistance are alcohol-related," he adds.

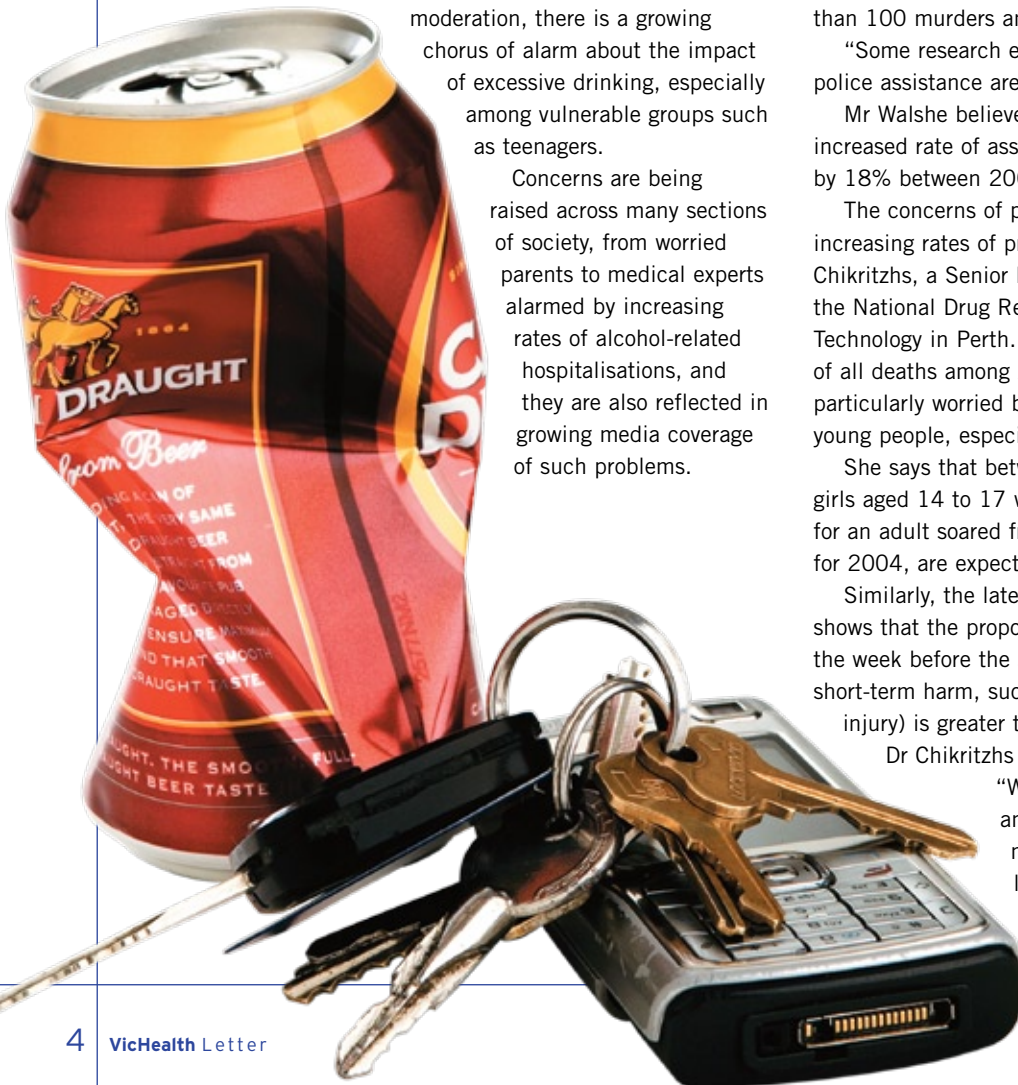
Mr Walshe believes that alcohol is also contributing to an increased rate of assaults in public places. Such assaults rose by 18% between 2002/03 and 2006/07 across the country.

The concerns of police are backed by data suggesting increasing rates of problematic drinking, according to Dr Tanya Chikritzhs, a Senior Research Fellow and Statistical Advisor at the National Drug Research Institute, at Curtin University of Technology in Perth. With alcohol estimated to account for 13% of all deaths among Australians aged 14 to 17, Dr Chikritzhs is particularly worried by the changing pattern of drinking among young people, especially teenage girls.

She says that between 1998 and 2001, the proportion of girls aged 14 to 17 who were drinking at levels considered risky for an adult soared from 1% to almost 10%. The latest figures, for 2004, are expected to show about 13% drink at risky levels.

Similarly, the latest Australian Secondary Schools Survey shows that the proportion of 12- to 15-year-olds who drank in the week before the survey at above low-risk levels (in danger of short-term harm, such as violent assault, falls, pedestrian road injury) is greater than at any time in the past 20 years, Dr Chikritzhs adds.

"We know that the earlier you start drinking and the more binge drinking that you do, the more likely you are to have problems in later life, such as brain injury and memory loss. People in early teenage years establish



drinking patterns they're unable to shake off, and some carry those harmful drinking patterns into adulthood. We're seeing a new cohort of girls, with a higher prevalence of heavy drinking, who will eventually grow older, and ultimately face many chronic problems, such as alcohol dependency, liver failure and mental health issues."

Risky drinking is particularly pronounced in country communities, adds Associate Professor Paul Dietze from the Burnet Institute Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health Research and the Monash Institute of Health Services Research.

"We've identified higher rates of consumption and harm in regional and rural areas and generally an increase in alcohol-caused hospitalisation rates," he says.

Associate Professor Dietze believes the findings reflect the central role of hotels, pubs and sporting clubs in rural and regional life. A National Drug Research Institute researcher has previously also described a heavy-drinking rural culture, based on the notion that 'you're a good bloke if you're a good drinker'.

Meanwhile, the hazards of excessive drinking are also highlighted in revised national guidelines released recently by the National Health and Medical Research Council for public comment. The proposed new Australian alcohol guidelines for low-risk drinking take a tougher stance than previous guidelines, and stress the risks to young people and other vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with mental health problems and pregnant or breastfeeding women. They recommend that adults have two standard drinks or less on any one day and advise that not drinking at all is the safest option for those under 18 and for women who are pregnant, planning pregnancy or breastfeeding.

There are many more licensed venues, and they're open virtually around the clock

The guidelines also note that everyone in society bears the costs of risky drinking, through the burden on health, welfare, police and emergency services. They cite estimates that alcohol cost the Australian community about \$15.3 billion in 2004–05, through crime, violence, treatment, loss of productivity and premature death. However, this figure is probably conservative as the cost of alcohol-related absenteeism alone has been estimated at \$1.2 billion per year.

ENTRENCHED BINGE DRINKING CULTURE

Australia is not alone, however, in grappling with a grog problem. Concerns about binge drinking regularly hit the headlines in the UK, the United States and elsewhere.

Nor is it a new concern – Australia's reputation for heavy drinking dates back to the earliest days of European settlement, with one historian claiming that "no people on the face of the earth ever absorbed more alcohol per head of population" than the early settlers.¹

But Mr Geoff Munro, who has worked in the alcohol and drug field for more than 20 years, has been struck by how some aspects of the alcohol challenge have changed dramatically in recent years.



Munro, director of the Community Alcohol Action Network (CAAN), says national competition policies have made it easier than ever for people to drink to excess, by easing restrictions on liquor licensing and contributing to a proliferation of alcohol outlets, helping keep prices relatively low. The National Alcohol Strategy notes, for example, that the price of wine dropped in real terms between 1998–99 and 2003–04, while spirits have stayed at almost the same price in real terms for the past decade.

In Victoria, the licensing reforms which followed the Nieuwenhuysen review of liquor controls in the mid 1980s also contributed to a proliferation of alcohol outlets. The National Alcohol Strategy notes that the number of liquor licences in Victoria almost tripled from around 4000 in 1986 to more than 19,000 in 2004.

"What's different is that alcohol has been deregulated," says Mr Munro. "There are many more licensed venues, and they're open virtually around the clock. It's easier to drink now than at any time in the past."

At the same time, many new products, such as sweet and ready-mixed drinks, have particular appeal for young palates. "The industry has been able to market products that almost seem designed for young people," says Munro.

And while Munro has also watched the community become generally more health-conscious over the past 20 years, this has not generally translated into wiser attitudes towards alcohol. Alcohol is so deeply entrenched into the Australian culture that those who highlight its negatives are still likely to be labelled 'wowsers', he says.

Indeed, the National Alcohol Strategy refers to Australians' propensity for 'getting pissed' and notes that "many of the dangers

of alcohol for those who drink, and those around them, are misunderstood, tolerated or ignored”.

Says Munro, “We are still very complacent about alcohol problems. We are unwilling to look too closely at the way in which we use alcohol. Part of the reason for our blindness is that most of us enjoy alcohol and gain pleasure from it.”

Governments’ focus on illicit drugs – despite alcohol being second only to tobacco as a preventable cause of drug-related death and hospitalisation – may also contribute to this ‘blindness’, says the social researcher and author, Hugh Mackay.

“The emphasis on illicit drugs and the war on drugs makes alcohol seem harmless by comparison,” he says. “The more governments, politicians and church leaders rail against illicit drugs, the better alcohol looks, even though, in terms of its effect on violence and health, it’s obviously overwhelmingly the problem.”

In his latest book, *Advance Australia ...Where?*, Mackay also suggests that increases in problem drinking are symptomatic of an era in which Australians have sought to escape from the world’s troubles and become a “rather disengaged, self-absorbed society”.

Increased affluence and social changes are also contributing to problematic drinking, says Professor George Patton, VicHealth Professor/Director of Adolescent Health Research at the Centre for Adolescent Health at the University of Melbourne. Teenagers are starting to drink younger and younger. “Young people used to come to alcohol at the age of 17 or 18, but it is now commonly used by kids from age 14,” says Professor Patton.

“You’ve got some pretty powerful forces behind the rising rates of alcohol use and alcohol disorders in young people. With kids starting to drink so young, we’re seeing signs of addiction by age 17 or 18.”

While the long-term impact of such drinking has not yet been studied, Professor Patton expects it will be grim. “We haven’t got

longer-term studies of this generation but we know that they’re doing less well in social adjustment in their twenties,” he says.

“The hunch is many will have worsening alcohol problems so that by their thirties and forties, they will be physically damaged by that pattern of drinking.”

GROWING PRESSURE TO ACT

Not surprisingly, governments and the alcohol industry are facing mounting pressure to tackle the alcohol toll. Measures suggested by leading policy experts include taxation reform, such as incentives to promote low-alcohol products and taxing all products according to alcohol content, enforcement of stricter regulations on sale and marketing, and a ban on alcohol sponsorship of sport.

Many also believe governments need to crack down on advertising, arguing that self-regulation has failed to stop promotion directed at young people. A study published earlier this year in *Drug and Alcohol Review*, which searched 93 magazines popular with youth, found that two-thirds contained at least one alcohol advertisement or promotion.

There are also calls for hard-hitting campaigns to raise public understanding of the consequences of risky drinking. Many experts note, for example, that the community generally has little understanding of what makes a standard drink (equivalent to a 100 ml glass of wine, one can of mid-strength beer or a 30 ml nip of spirits) and therefore how to drink safely.

Professor Patton argues that a much tougher message needs to go out to the community about the hazards of drinking, especially for young people. “We need to do more effective health promotion than simply ‘drink but do it safely,’” he says. “Many of us feel that this gentle approach hasn’t worked. The message has been unclear and it’s left both parents and young people unsure about sensible ways of using alcohol. We need to be clear that the kind of drinking



that happens at so many teenage parties is unlikely to do anybody any good. The notion that young people of 14 should be able to go to a party and drink is crazy. Any parent who thinks it's a good idea is asking for trouble."

However, many public health experts believe that governments lack the political will to confront the powerful interests involved, including clubs and pubs, the brewing, spirits and wine industries, sporting organisations, supermarket chains and the advertising and media industries.

They note, for example, that the Federal Government is unwilling to continue support for the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation, despite its reputation for funding innovative, effective projects. Yet the government has given \$5 million to an industry-supported body, DrinkWise Australia, whose effectiveness is questioned by many in the public health community.

Munro argues that effective policies are more likely to eventuate if there is a ban on the industry making donations to political parties. "The alcohol industry has very strong links with the major parties," he says.

"That's a major problem for anyone trying to change the law or regulations or policy in a way that might not suit the alcohol industry's interests. It's striking that the only political parties to make alcohol an issue are the minor parties."

Meanwhile, Mr Brian Kearney, chief executive officer of the Australian Hotels Association Victoria, says calls for greater regulation of licensed outlets are misplaced as 70% of alcohol consumed in Victoria is drunk away from licensed premises. The Association's submission to a review of Victorian regulations on the sale of packaged liquor, currently being undertaken by the Liquor Control Advisory Council, argues that the government cannot rely on the liquor-licensing system to control the majority of alcohol consumption. The Association, does, however, call for it to be made an offence for anyone other than a parent, or a person with the permission of a parent, to supply alcohol to a minor in a private residence. It also wants a community education campaign about the risks and penalties of secondary supply of alcohol to minors.

Mr Kearney also believes there is room for greater regulation of supermarket sales and marketing. However, he argues that much of the violence currently arousing public concern is "completely unrelated to alcohol or drugs".

"Alcohol is but one contributor to an increasing trend of violence in entertainment precincts unrelated to the venues," he says. "That's not seeking to absolve alcohol but it's a multidimensional issue. You can't put all your eggs in the basket of alcohol as solving what are some fundamental community issues."

However, Deputy Commissioner, Kieran Walshe sees it differently. "Particularly with regards to the inner Melbourne CBD and nightclub strips, we've certainly been experiencing deterioration in public order," he says. "While we probably don't understand all the causes of that deterioration, it's reasonable to state that alcohol is a driver."

Another barrier to more effective policies is the lack of data to guide decision-making, particularly at a local level, says Dr Tanya Chikritzhs. She notes that only the Northern Territory and Western Australia continue to collect data on alcohol sales.

"In WA, we know that consumption is increasing and that in the NT it's steadily going up again after a big drop in the early 1990s.

But we can't talk about what's happening in Victoria, NSW or Queensland with any confidence."

Dr Chikritzhs doesn't expect changes to Australia's drinking culture will come easily. "We have a pretty well-entrenched binge drinking style," she says. "It's been that way for many decades.

I don't see it changing too quickly in the future; asking a country to change its 'culture' is a bit like asking an individual to change their character."

However, Geoff Munro is hopeful that a groundswell of community concern may lead to new political interest. "I'd point to the number of prestigious media outlets and television programs that have run specials on the alcohol problem this year," he says.

Hugh Mackay is also optimistic that a change may be occurring about a whole range of social issues, including binge drinking. "Over the next five years, we will become a much more engaged, active kind of society," he predicts. "We will be much more open to serious debate about issues."

VicHealth, which has made minimising alcohol harm a priority in its strategic plan, believes the way forward lies in forging broad coalitions, according to Chief Executive Officer, Mr Todd Harper.

"The most effective health promotion strategies are those that engage a broad range of stakeholders," he says. "With alcohol, local government is one of the most critical and there are also opportunities with schools, health groups, the research community, business and sporting clubs. It'll take some brave and creative thinking to tackle this significant problem in the community."

Melissa Sweet is a freelance journalist and health writer, and an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the School of Public Health, University of Sydney.

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VICHEALTH'S COMMITMENT TO PREVENTING AND REDUCING ALCOHOL MISUSE

From the start, VicHealth has supported and funded a range of programs and research initiatives addressing the misuse of alcohol. More recently, as part of its Strategic Framework for 2006–2009, a set of objectives for reducing alcohol misuse have been adopted, acknowledging harmful drinking as a priority area for action in health promotion within Victoria.

To drive the delivery of these objectives and to manage our current investments in preventing and reducing alcohol misuse, VicHealth has established its Tobacco Control and Alcohol Harm Reduction Unit. The work of this new Unit within VicHealth will strive to be evidence-based and innovative, as well as collaborative with government and community partners.

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ALCOHOL

is a brain-altering substance with high social costs

Come and have 'a few drinks'. It's a common invitation that belies the reality of drinking in Australia – that intoxication is often more likely than moderation.

At least 80% of all alcohol consumed in Australia in 2001 put the health and safety of drinkers at risk of acute harm (such as alcohol-related injuries) or chronic harm (such as cancer or alcoholic liver cirrhosis).¹

Young people aren't shying away from the risks of having a few too many. About 40% of 16- to 17-year-old Victorian high school students who were regular drinkers drank at a high level of risk on their last drinking occasion.² This means having more than six standard drinks for males and more than four standard drinks for females on their last drinking occasion.

Over half of the 17-year-olds in the study believed that drinking alcohol was one of the best ways to relax and get to know people. With alcohol so integral to our idea of having 'a good time', it can be hard to reconcile the pain that this pervasive party drug causes. This includes the pain of death. It's estimated that one Australian teenager dies and more than 60 are hospitalised each week from alcohol-related causes, according to the National Drug Research Institute.³

Senior Sergeant Phil Harrison and his team at the Melbourne East police office are responsible, with other stations, for maintaining public order in the City of Melbourne, which has 1600 licensed premises, 40 of which are open 24 hours. "The most disturbing effect of alcohol we see is young people receiving serious injuries and some losing their lives," says Harrison. "We've had a number of cases in the last few years where there's been a minor assault, the victim falls to the pavement and incurs serious brain injury or dies. In situations like this, both parties have usually been drinking, and what would normally be a minor incident ends up as a tragedy."

As well as death, other acute dangers that intoxicated teenagers face include intoxication, memory loss, blacking out and the potential for violence and sexual risk-taking.⁴

Impaired brain development is also an issue. "We used to think that the brain reached its adult size by the age of six, with limited capacity for new growth," says Dr Dan Lubman, Senior Lecturer in Addiction Psychiatry at the University of Melbourne and head of the Substance Use Research and Recovery Focused Program at ORYGEN Research Centre. "But neurobiological research now indicates that the brain changes markedly during adolescence, mirroring improvements in the young person's emotional and cognitive functioning. However, it seems that the brain doesn't

finish maturing until the mid twenties, and that it may be more sensitive to damage from addictive substances during this time."

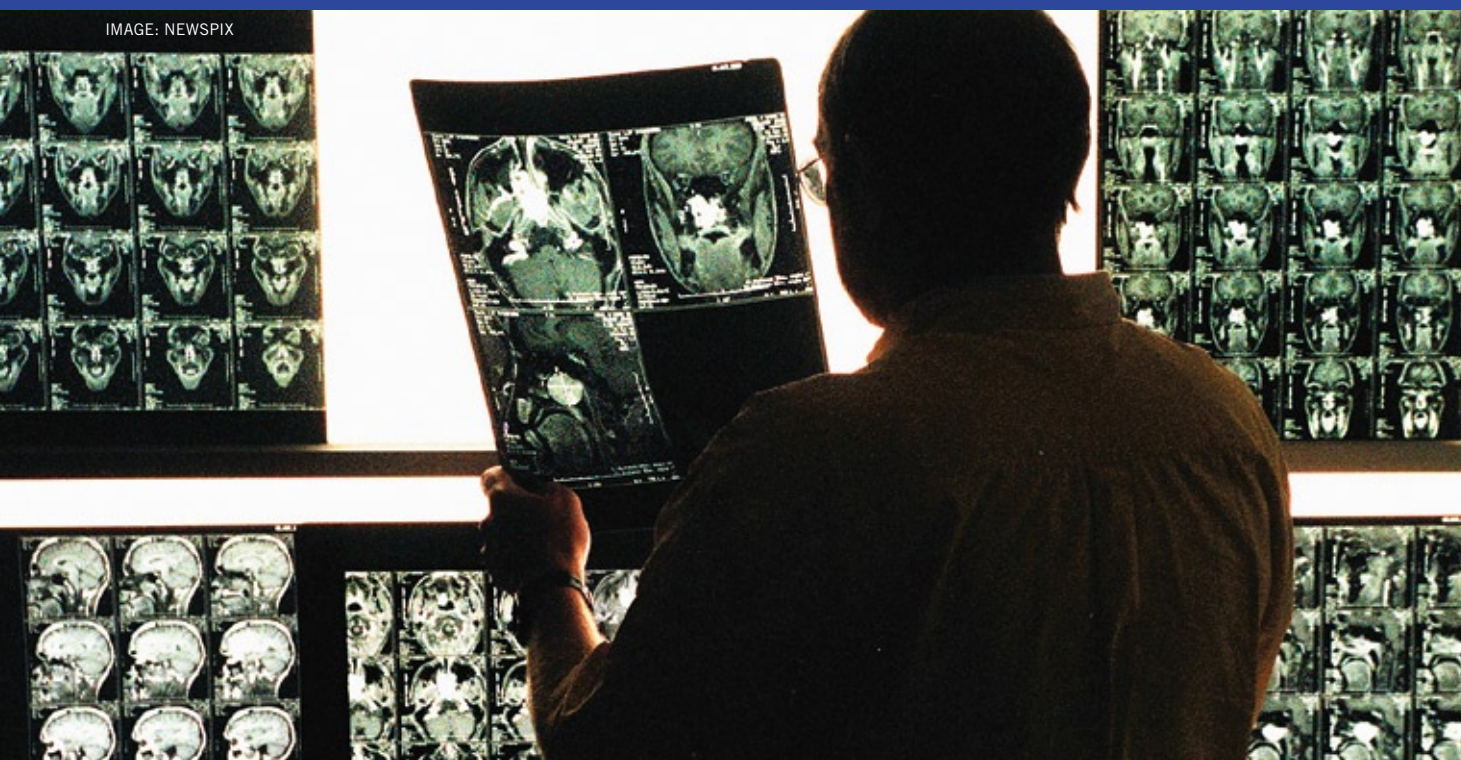
Two key areas of the brain that are particularly affected by heavy alcohol use are the temporal lobes, which relate to memory and learning, and the frontal parts of brain, which are involved in planning, judgement and the regulation of behaviours and emotions, according to Lubman. "While the research is limited, it does show that adolescents who regularly binge drink are more likely to have problems with memory and learning as well as in smaller related regions of the brain,"^{5 6} says Lubman.

The brains of females appear to be more susceptible to damage from alcohol than males', according to Lubman. This is quite a concern given the way teenage girls are lapping up cans of sweet, pre-mixed spirits – their drink of choice. Among 12- to 15-year-old female Victorian high school students who were regular drinkers, levels of drinking at risk of short-term harm in 2005 were the highest they've been in all surveys conducted since 1984, except 2002.⁷

"The cognitive deficits we are seeing in teenagers as a result of risky drinking are quite subtle," says Lubman, "but they are enough to affect a young person's aspirations – whether they get a C rather than a B in an exam, or whether they can get into the course they want to."

Over half of the 17-year-olds in the study believed that drinking alcohol was one of the best ways to relax and get to know people

The effects may be subtle, but the habit of drinking can take a strong hold and track into adulthood. "Being introduced to alcohol by year seven is an independent risk factor for frequent binge drinking at year 9, and frequency of drinking in the middle years of high school is the strongest risk factor for developing alcohol dependence in the early twenties," says Professor John Toumbourou, from the School of Psychology at Deakin University. Alcohol dependence currently affects 11% of Australians aged between 18 and 34 years. While the available studies on the longer-term impact of adolescent alcohol use aren't conclusive, Toumbourou states that they consistently show that early and frequent use approximately doubles the risk of subsequent



Certain substances, such as alcohol, are known to be neurotoxic in adults. Researchers have begun investigating the effects of alcohol on brain structure and function, with growing evidence showing that addictive substances may lead to significant disturbances in brain development in adolescence.

alcohol-related problems. This is true even when individual and social risk factors for alcohol problems are controlled for.⁸

Dr Roger Brough, Director of Drug and Alcohol Services, South West Healthcare in Warrnambool, sees clients who are struggling with problematic alcohol use on a daily basis. Of all the consequences of alcohol abuse he witnesses, Brough finds alcohol-related brain injury (ARBI) the most disturbing. It's a condition that ranges from mild to severe, leading to a progressive decline in intellectual functioning and capacity to address problems.

Alcohol-related brain injury is not as rare as it might sound. Based on the number of Australians drinking at hazardous levels for long-term harm, at least one in 10 Australian adults is estimated to experience some degree of ARBI, according to Alcohol Related Brain Injury Australian Services (Arbias).

"I see people in their thirties and forties suffering from ARBI, who need long-term supervised care from something that's 100% preventable," says Brough. ARBI is most likely to become apparent during times of change, such as job change or relationship break-up, as these situations expose the functional damage to the frontal lobes, which normally allow a person to learn new information and so adapt to change.

"People with ARBI often get labelled as unreliable or untrustworthy because they have trouble planning and organising themselves and remembering things, such as appointments," says Brough. "Sufferers become more vulnerable to assaults and victimisation from others as their functions decline." While there is some evidence that abstinence from alcohol use is associated with some recovery of function and improvement, provided the damage isn't severe, most acquired brain impairment is permanent, according to Arbias. The costs are many, including the direct health costs, providing residential and in-home support, reduced employment prospects and difficulty sustaining relationships. The burden on family and friends is usually severe. "Partners may need

to get a job to support a family that had been provided for by the drinker in their earlier drinking days, and parents may be called on to become carers for dependent brain-damaged adult children as well as full-time carers for their grandchildren," says Brough.

"It's often underestimated how much alcohol can affect a person's life trajectory," concludes Brough. "It usually has the most damaging effects on the people who can least afford it – those with lower levels of social support and financial security."

WHO ARE THE RISKIEST DRINKERS?

People in the 20–29-year age group show the riskiest drinking profile. About 60% drink at above 2001 guideline levels for accidents and injuries and about 15% drink at above 2001 guideline levels for alcohol-related diseases.

Thea O'Connor is a health promotion consultant, speaker and regular contributor to the Sydney Morning Herald.

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A LEGAL DRUG but no ordinary commodity

The conflict between treating alcohol as ‘just another commodity’ and as a health issue capable of causing harm to communities is a conundrum. In economic and trade terms, alcohol provides significant tax revenue and leverage for trade agreements; but the increasing realisation of the harm caused has forced a rethink about managing this ‘legal drug’.

In Australia, the powers and interests of each level of government create a complex tapestry of alcohol policy. Responsibilities for taxation, market regulation and competition and advertising standards rest primarily at a national level. Health, law enforcement and liquor licensing fall generally to the states/territories, leaving local governments, with limited resources and even more limited powers, working with planning and municipal by-laws.

It is widely agreed that consensus across all levels is critical, but not so easy to marry the policy with the research literature. Professor Robin Room, the Director for the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research at Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, and an expert in international policy on alcohol, explains: “The fundamental story of the research is that what is most effective is not politically popular and vice versa.”

“For example, availability of alcohol is high, but there is little support for restrictions. Education in schools is politically popular, but it is difficult to show its effectiveness. There are mixed results on restraining advertising.”

TRADE RULES!

Unlike illicit drugs or tobacco, no global convention or international agreements on alcohol as a drug exist, despite the World Health Organisation’s work in reporting global trends in alcohol consumption and interventions on its abuse.¹ This is



How many standard drinks? To cut through the confusion, NHMRC has released new draft guidelines recommending two or less standard drinks a day regardless of gender.

because alcohol is categorised as an ‘agricultural’ product and put in the context of international trade agreements.

For countries that have stringent domestic alcohol regulation, regional alcohol policies have not helped. Sweden and Norway, for example, have had to make concessions as members of the European Union – which also regards alcohol primarily as an economic commodity.

Professor Room points to Sweden as a standout example of what can be achieved. When compared to Australia, the Swedish strategies can only be described as courageous. For example, the availability of alcohol is tightly restricted. High-strength beer, wine and spirits can only be purchased from government-owned outlets and purchasers must be 20 years or older. Low-strength beers can be bought by people 18 years and above at privately owned businesses or corner shops. Alcohol is taxed on strength; below 2.8% by volume there is no tax at all.

“We need to think about drugs and alcohol in the same frame,” says Professor Room. “Alcohol is a very serious drug, and the risks from it are substantial ... there needs to be acceptance that it’s not an ordinary commodity.”

In November 2007, the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AERF) announced funding of a two-year research project, to be conducted by Professor Room, to investigate the third-party harm of alcohol misuse. It’s a sort of ‘passive drinking’ study, seeking to quantify the social and economic costs of

A MIXED DOZEN

Twelve alcohol matters that have flavoured the past year

Alcohol has attracted the attention of the community, political leaders and the media for all the wrong reasons over the past year. With so much interest in addressing alcohol problems, it now seems only a matter of time before a new force for change emerges to tackle the causes and effects of our drinking culture.

1. Final report is handed down by Victorian Parliament's Drug and Crime Prevention Committee's (DCPC) 3-year long inquiry into strategies to reduce harmful consumption of alcohol.

The DCPC handed down 165 recommendations in its final report, the largest ever produced on the alcohol problem in Victoria. In September 2006, the Victorian Government tabled its response to the Inquiry in State Parliament, supporting 140 of the recommendations.

2. Alcohol outlet numbers soar past 19,000

In 2007, the number of the alcohol outlets in Victoria represented more than double that of 10 years earlier. On average, two new alcohol outlets are approved everyday in Victoria.

3. Report finds one young Victorian is killed every week from alcohol-related causes

Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre also reported that just over half of all Victorians aged 16–24 years drank at risky/high-risk levels at least once a month.

4. Thinking Drinking II Conference calls for a new coalition of groups to tackle the alcohol problem

The Community Alcohol Action Network (CAAN) hosted a major alcohol research and policy conference in Melbourne to harness the ideas and energy of the groups committed to working towards a safer drinking culture for Australia.

5. Liquor Control Advisory Council (LCAC) begins inquiry into the health and social impacts of packaged liquor in Victoria

Responding to growing community concern about increases in alcohol-related harm coupled with the increasing availability of alcohol, LCAC has commenced an inquiry into the density of packaged liquor outlets, liquor licensing criteria, access of minors to packaged liquor, and the promotion of alcohol products.

6. Inappropriate alcohol advertisements withdrawn after public complaints

Several advertisements were banned by the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) following complaints from the public, including ads for James Boags beer, Jagermeister liqueur, Absolut vodka, and Bondi Blonde beer.

7. Liquor licence refused for discount bulk alcohol shop

After hearing objections raised by the City of Darebin Council and Victoria Police that a new alcohol outlet in the northern suburb of Preston would contribute to more alcohol-related harm in the area, the Victorian Director of Liquor Licensing refused to grant a liquor licence for the 'Cheaper Wines' shop.

8. New Victorian Alcohol Action Plan (VAAP) Taskforce established by State Government

The new Taskforce will assist the State Government in the development of the VAAP by advising on priorities for whole-of-government action to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harm in the Victorian community.

9. Victoria Police get new powers and resources to crack down on problem alcohol outlets

In response to new figures showing an increase in assaults in and around licensed venues in Melbourne, Premier Brumby announced new legislation to give police powers to shut down nightclubs immediately for 24 hours if violence is occurring or public safety is threatened.

10. ACCC tightens regulation of alcohol promotions to protect young people

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) authorises a new regulatory scheme requiring alcohol manufacturers and retailers to remove inappropriately named or packaged alcohol products from the market.

11. New drinking guidelines for Australians proposed by National Health and Medical Research Council

A limit for two standard drinks per day for all Australian adults who drink has been recommended by the NHMRC to promote 'low risk' consumption alcohol.

12. Victorian Premier announces: "Alcohol is now the biggest social issue facing Victoria, and I think it's one of the biggest threats to young Victorians"

Victorian hospital emergency departments have experienced a 63% increase in alcohol-related attendances in the past seven years, up from 6524 in 1999–2000 to 10,641 last year.



drinking and also the effects on family, friends and workmates, as well as damage caused through anti-social behaviour.

Foundation CEO Daryl Smeaton says that while alcohol has a place in society, the social and health harms must be understood. He expects this research to "quantify how much drinking costs the people who aren't drunk and challenge the idea that alcohol has minimal impact on Australians".

There have been moves to address the issue from a health policy perspective overseas, with the establishment of the European Commission for Community Health Directorate charged with the protection and promotion of the health of Europeans, and the development of the European Alcohol Action Plan.²

Professor Margaret Hamilton, Co-Deputy Chair of the Australian National Council on Drugs, headed the team that developed a draft for a new National Alcohol Strategy in 2005. It was recognised by public health and academic sectors that legislative and regulatory approaches were critical.

"Federal government has responsibility for some of the most potent levers for effecting change – taxation and competition policy," she says. The other area in which they have primary jurisdiction is advertising regulation.

However, Professor Hamilton believes that policy on all levels can become unhelpfully complicated, especially because "there are social and cultural interests in maintaining high drinking levels".

Added to these are the business interests of the alcohol industry. The answer, she says, is to clarify the ultimate problem and the aim: "We need agreement across government on the fundamental issue. If we could do nothing else but reduce intoxication and intoxicated behaviour, we'd be getting somewhere."

She argues that a clear, common purpose provides clarity for how laws may be developed or reviewed, how pricing mechanisms for alcohol can be reviewed and what advertising restrictions might be useful.

While she disagrees with the alcohol bans and restrictions being imposed in the Northern Territory as part of the Federal Government's intervention in Indigenous communities, she believes the results of the 'experiment' should be scrutinised closely.

Professor Room has watched the alcohol industry closely here and overseas and is wary of their involvement in strategies to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol – particularly through the vehicle of 'social aspects organisations'.³ These organisations tend to engage in research projects, education and media campaigns about responsible drinking and promote the self-regulation of alcohol advertising and promotion.

Experts, including Professor Room, view organisations like DrinkWise⁴ (the Australian incarnation of these organisations) with some scepticism, reporting that "the evidence is clear that these are ineffective ways of reducing alcohol-related harm".⁵ Experts believe only time will tell whether "DrinkWise will prove to have been what many fear – an attempt by the alcohol industry to avert serious consideration of public health policies that will adversely affect their bottom line."

LABELS AND WARNINGS

Health warnings on beverages have been called for by the Victorian Parliament's Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee in their 2006 report *Inquiry into strategies to reduce harmful alcohol consumption*, as well as by numerous other bodies including the Australian Drug Foundation and the AMA; but these have yet to be adopted. A previous attempt in 1998 by the 'Society without Alcoholic Trauma' to mandate health warnings on alcohol product labels were rejected by ANZFA (now Food Standards Australia New Zealand).

In the UK, the *Alcohol Labelling Act 2007* will bring changes to the labelling on alcoholic beverages to include a 'government warning', with a warning symbol clearly visible. From 1 January 2008 penalties for non-compliance include prison. Warning labels are mandatory in about 20 countries around the world, including the USA.

VICTORIAN INQUIRY

In the search for a workable policy and legislative framework to prevent rising misuse of alcohol, including the worrying high-risk drinking patterns of young people and thousands of alcohol-related deaths in Victoria each year, the Victorian Parliament launched an Inquiry with the release of a Discussion Paper in 2004.⁶

In March 2006 the Victorian Parliament's Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee tabled the Inquiry's Final Report – two volumes with more than 1400 pages and 165 recommendations based on numerous submissions and more than 100 public meetings in Victoria, interstate and Europe. It provides both a comprehensive round-up of responses to harmful alcohol consumption in local, interstate and international jurisdictions, and the responses of various interventions from communities, services, individuals and governments. Recommendations addressed research, policy development, education, legislation, campaigns and treatment.

In September 2006 the Victorian Government responded to the report. While a key recommendation to establish a dedicated Office of Alcohol Policy and Coordination was rejected (because its functions are performed within the existing government structure), a statement of government policy on alcohol issues is in development.

“We need to think about drugs and alcohol in the same frame”

ACTIONS UNDERWAY

In 2007 the Victorian Government reviewed the *Liquor Control Act 1998* in a bid to curb irresponsible alcohol consumption and its impacts.

In May, the sale and supply of alcohol-filled 'go-tubes' and similar products were banned. The aluminium tubes contained nearly two standard pre-mixed vodka drinks with alcohol strengths varying from 4–10.5%, marketed as an alcoholic 'energy' drink in a range of juice flavours. Easily concealable, the then Minister for Consumer Affairs, Daniel Andrews, expressed concern that they could "be taken into events where the supply of alcohol is not appropriate or banned".

In August, Premier John Brumby announced new laws to tackle alcohol-fuelled violence around licensed venues. Concerned with increased street assaults (up by 10.9% from 2005/06) and in licensed premises (up by 7.3%), the Premier's announcement foreshadowed additional police powers to shut down nightclubs and ban troublemakers, and strengthened liquor-licensing laws, including increasing penalties for irresponsible service of alcohol and serving alcohol without a licence. The legislation is being drafted.

The Victorian Alcohol Action Plan (VAAP) will take a 'whole-of-government' approach to addressing health and regulatory issues, and complement the National Alcohol Strategy.

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Promoting a drinking WAY OF LIFE

The alcohol industry spends millions every year on its marketing mix – a pervasive cocktail of price, product, place and promotion. With the current generation of young people exposed to more advertising and integrated marketing strategies than ever before, it's time to see whether we have done enough to protect the vulnerable from its powerful influence.

Go into any liquor outlet and look at the refrigerator displays: you'll find a dazzling array of products – brightly coloured bottles and cans sporting evocative names like 'Cruiser' and 'Pulse', or innocent-sounding ones like 'Mudshake'.

Heavily sweetened and vibrantly packaged, these pre-mixed, ready-to-drink (RTD) beverages can contain as much as 6%, 7% or even 9% alcohol by volume. They are becoming increasingly popular among drinkers of all stripes,¹ but especially worrying is their strong appeal for young people. Studies have repeatedly shown that these RTDs, whose sweetness often completely disguises the taste of alcohol, are the booze of choice for underage drinkers.²

In a disturbing development, an industry insider stated in 2007 that the alcohol industry has been deliberately targeting youths with these pre-mixed beverages. Mat Baxter, from the marketing company who promoted the now-withdrawn Absolut Cut RTDs, told *The Age* that there had been "a conscious effort to make those drinks more appealing to young people", and that they were designed to allow "people to get drunk quickly".³

Baxter's admission shocked some, but also confirmed what critics of alcohol marketing had been saying for years – that some of the industry's promotional strategies encourage binge drinking and are aimed at the young. "Even though it was significant to have someone from the industry admit it, we've really known this for a long time," says Geoff Munro, director of the Community Alcohol Action Network (CAAN).

The incident raises questions about the tactics of some alcohol marketers in this country, and what can be done to mitigate their influence.

INFLUENCING THE WIDER CULTURE

A huge amount of money is spent on alcohol advertising – about \$130 million in 2005–06.⁴ According to Mike Daube, Professor of Health Policy at Curtin University, even this is only part of the story.

"There are good indications that when you take into account other forms of promotion you double that number. So the drinks industry probably spends at least a quarter of a billion dollars on promoting its products in Australia every year."

It is obvious the industry equates advertising with higher sales, and they are probably right – studies have drawn strong links between exposure to alcohol advertising and drinking behaviour, especially in young people.⁵



Alcohol marketing and promotions are highly pervasive in Australia today. They are a major driver of our drinking cultures, influencing our beliefs and attitudes towards alcohol and how we consume it.

Some researchers, like Professor Sandra Jones of the Centre for Health Initiatives at Wollongong University, argue that the effect of these promotions goes beyond individual purchasing decisions to influence how we perceive alcohol and its place in society.

"It's not just that I see an ad for alcohol and therefore I go out and drink – I don't think for a moment it's that simple," says Jones. "If you look at the sorts of long-term effects on people's perceptions, there's a very strong message that drinking is something everybody does."

Cultural stereotypes, like the Aussie larrikin or the independent, party-loving woman, are also widely used in liquor advertisements, says Jones, and these messages are pervasive. "There is so much marketing that we are absolutely surrounded by it, and it presents people who drink alcohol as happy, successful, outgoing people who have wonderful lives."

GETTING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

The bulk of the alcohol industry's advertising expenditure, about 46%, goes on metropolitan television adverts, with significant amounts also spent on outdoor ads and print media.⁶

Despite restrictions on content and exposure that are meant to protect children from these ads – for example, they must be shown after 8.30pm on weekends – Australian researchers have

SOMETHING TO COMPLAIN ABOUT?

There is little knowledge among the general public about the regulations on alcohol advertisements, and most do not know how to make an effective complaint.

Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code

Alcohol advertising can only be shown on television:

- on weekdays from 12 noon to 3pm and 8:30pm to 5am
- on weekends and public holidays between 8:30pm and 5am
- Exception: alcohol advertising can be shown on any day and at any time if during a "live" sporting broadcast.

Other restrictions include:

- Must not encourage under-age drinking;
- Not have a strong or evident appeal to children or adolescents
- Must not depict the consumption or presence of alcohol beverages as a cause of or contributing to the achievement of personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success
- The standards apply to internet sites and to banner ads of such products on third-party sites.

How to make a complaint

Your complaint must be in writing, lodged by post, fax or email and must include your postal address. You can also use the online complaints form on the website below.

The Advertising Standards Bureau

Level 2, 97 Northbourne Avenue

TURNER ACT 2612

Fax: (02) 6262 9833

To see the complete Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code go to www.abac.org.au

shown that alcohol ads are just as likely to be seen by 13–17-year-olds as adults.⁷

More exposure to young people comes via an increasing focus on Internet promotion. A study into online alcohol marketing uncovered an array of promotional techniques on alcohol company websites, many of which "represent potential appeal to children and adolescents", according to the researchers – these included interactive games, music mixing software and cartoon animation.⁸ Some companies have even begun infiltrating social networking sites – Cougar bourbon, for example, has been adding its fictional spokesman as a "friend" on MySpace pages.

"The Internet is a minefield of those sorts of promotions, where anyone, no matter what their age, can get in and see inappropriate messages about consuming bucket-loads of alcohol," says Sandra Jones. "It's a very difficult thing to regulate."

At the moment, most alcohol advertising is for beer brands, but there has also been an increasing marketing push from the makers of pre-mixed RTDs. The popularity of these drinks is growing fast – pre-mixed drinks showed a growth of 9% between 2004–05 and 2005–06, while overall drinking remained stable.⁹ A 2004 National Drug Household Survey also showed that RTDs were the preferred drink of 14- to 19-year-

olds who drink alcohol, and that they were the easy favourites among teens whose drinking puts them at the most risk of harm.¹⁰

Many have voiced concerns about ads for these drinks, which often feature bright, vibrant colours and themes that seem likely to appeal to youths. They even look like soft drinks, says Geoff Munro: "Smirnoff double black vodka, which contains two standard drinks within each bottle or can, is now being produced in a very slim cylindrical can that's very similar in shape, design and packaging to soft drinks. And they seem designed to fit very neatly into handbags and even hidden from view. The danger is that these products are pitched at the young binge drinker," says Munro.

"Whether deliberate or not, the industry is facilitating binge drinking by marketing products that make risky drinking easy."

TOOTHLESS REGULATIONS

Given the serious health and societal problems caused by alcohol, it is no surprise that there are some restrictions on the methods that can be used to promote it. Since 1998, liquor marketing has been self-regulated by the industry through both the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) and the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB), which are supposed to ensure that ads portray drinking in a mature and responsible way. ABAC, for example, bans advertisements that have a strong or evident appeal to children or adolescents, or that link alcohol with sexual, sporting or other kinds of success.¹¹

But critics say the system actually does little to prevent inappropriate advertising. "The wording [of ABAC] is extremely vague," says Mike Daube of Curtin University, "and even when someone manifestly transgresses the spirit of the code, nobody does anything about it." Despite the fact that the code forbids an association between alcohol and sexual success, he says, there are many liquor ads "dripping in sex", and many have an obvious appeal to young people.

Part of the reason the code is ineffective is that it is voluntary, with no penalties for non-compliance. "Even when advertisements are found to offend the code, the company can choose to comply or not, and there's no further penalty." A Bondi Blonde ad, for example, which was banned by ABAC, simply reappeared later on the web.

In 2003 the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) launched a formal review into the regulatory system and reported many problems, such as a slow judging process and poorly reported outcomes. It also found that only 5% of complaints were even assessed by ABAC, most being rejected outright by the Advertising Standards Bureau.¹²

Recent research has shown that public awareness of – and confidence in – this system is low.¹³ Less than 30% of people surveyed reported that they were aware of restrictions on alcohol advertising, and most did not know how to register a complaint. Only one in seven people surveyed had heard of ABAC, and of these, most could not describe what it was.

Geoff Munro believes these problems are a natural result of self-regulation. "I don't think self-regulation will ever work, because it's asking the industry to work against its own interest," says Geoff Munro. "Alcohol companies, in order to grow their profits, have to encourage more consumption and that means more problems."

GETTING AROUND THE RESTRICTIONS

Another problem is that ABAC is limited in scope – it does not cover many kinds of marketing, including in-store promotions, where prizes like hats, t-shirts or even extra drinks are offered to encourage bulk purchases. According to Sandra Jones, these promotions can have a big influence on purchasing decisions and can encourage excessive drinking, especially in the young, budget-conscious drinker.

“Particularly disturbing is when you buy four drinks and they give you a fifth for free. It’s obvious what you’re going to do with that fifth drink,” she says.

Internet promotions are another problem area, since although ABAC does include restrictions on Internet advertisements, many types of online promotions are not covered.

“The industry is facilitating binge drinking by marketing products that make risky drinking easy”

But probably the most powerful means for alcohol companies to get their message across is through sponsorship of sporting clubs and events. As well as offering companies massive exposure by letting them put their logos on guernseys and sporting pitches, thus associating liquor with successful sporting heroes, sport sponsorship has an additional advantage – ABAC states that alcohol ads cannot be shown on TV until after 8.30pm on weekends, except during live televised sporting matches which can include alcohol ads at any time.

According to Rod Glenn-Smith, Victorian State Manager of Good Sports, this kind of sponsorship entrenches the association between sport and booze. “The continual link between sporting success and alcohol is the one that troubles us,” he says. From alcohol abuse by AFL stars to the spraying of champagne after racing victories, there is already a powerful link – “and if you keep putting [alcohol advertisements] out there it is just reinforcing that link.”

Currently, every team both in the AFL and the NRL has a drinks industry sponsor. The industry, as Mark Daube puts it, is “soggy in liquor sponsorship”. Good Sports, an initiative of the Australian Drug Foundation, is dedicated to working with sporting clubs at both the local and the national level to help address the pervasive association between sport and alcohol, including liquor sponsorship.

“I think there is a growing acceptance that [alcohol sponsorship] is not a great thing, but because of the strong support of the alcohol companies to the sport, via sponsorship, it’s not an easy thing to stop,” says Glenn-Smith.

REINING IN THE INDUSTRY

The effects of alcohol advertising go well beyond encouraging people to buy one brand over another. From product development, packaging and marketing techniques that exacerbate irresponsible drinking to the pervasive association of drinking with social and sporting success, alcohol promotion portrays drinking as an essential part of life, reinforcing the place of booze in Australian society.

It seems, though, that many want to rein in the industry’s influence. Research into public perception of alcohol marketing

found that most – around 3 in 5 – thought there should be more restrictions on liquor marketing,¹⁴ and there has long been a chorus of voices from organisations like CAAN calling for an end to self-regulation. “The alcohol industry has shown repeatedly that it cannot be trusted to market alcohol in a responsible fashion,” says Geoff Munro.

To replace the current system, according to Munro, we need a government body with the power to penalise for improper advertisements. Munro also believes the new system should regulate other forms of promotion, like sports sponsorship. “There are a whole host of ways by which young people are exposed to marketing that won’t be captured by any advertising code.”

Others have called for measures such as caps on alcohol advertising expenditure, or outright banning of sport sponsorship. But whatever the details, the overwhelming theme is that more restrictions are needed.

Limiting alcohol marketing may not solve Australia’s alcohol problem, but it could go some way toward the long-term goal of addressing our drinking culture. Just as marketing strategies are developed to maximise product sales, we need to devise a marketing mix that minimises the damage of the risky drinking epidemic.

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Local governments act on alcohol

Three young men exchange heated words across the pool table at the busy Lorne Hotel. It takes one punch for the celebrations to come to a brutal end for 19-year-old Jon Hucker, who ends up in a coma in hospital with a serious brain injury.

Surf Coast Shire Councillor, Libby Meares, remembers the incident well. “When I heard about it, I felt sick because it’s a horrible scenario, a young person in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Cr Meares, a health promotion worker for many years, adds passionately: “There’s alcohol-related violence in all areas of Victoria, all year round. So it’s not something specific to Lorne at ‘Schoolies’ time. In fact, the low number of physical assaults are a testament to the shire’s work.”

The figures¹ show that despite the Surf Coast having a high density of liquor outlets, it has comparatively low levels of violence, road injuries and hospital admissions related to alcohol.

The Surf Coast Shire, like other local governments, is working out new ways of reducing harm from alcohol, such as developing the Schoolies Working Group, which has police working alongside youth. It has developed practical ways of reducing harm amongst young people, including keeping the coast free of alcohol drink bottles, since broken glass is one of the biggest risks. A Schoolies website has also been developed, which highlights some of the measures being taken, including a shuttle bus service to help young people get around safely, a free health clinic, a Chill Out Zone and a free Water Program.

Managing thousands of high school-leavers ready to party in a small town is no easy feat. The Surf Coast has several other large events to manage, including New Year’s Eve and the Falls Festival. Cr Meares acknowledges that some locals think many out-of-towners are trouble and the town would be better off without them. However, the economic benefits of the tourism industry to the Surf Coast are tangible, raising millions of dollars for the accommodation sector alone.

But it involves much more than managing crowds. Councillor Darren Ray knows well the dangers of alcohol. He has observed the City of Port Phillip, one of the busiest councils in Australia, cope with millions of alcohol-swilling tourists. Director of Policy and Public Affairs at the Victorian Local Government Association, Cr Ray says over the past 10 years the role of local government has changed. “People understand that it’s important for local governments to play a leadership role,” he says.

Cr Ray has also worked on the historic Safer City Licensees Accord in Port Phillip. Initially aimed at reducing pedestrian death and injury, the Accord partners the city with licensees, Victoria Police, Consumer Affairs Victoria and VicRoads. The Accord has trained more than 1500 bar staff to serve alcohol responsibly. It has established a safe taxi rank in busy Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. Trams have also extended their operating times on weekends.

Violence has been addressed by encouraging the hire of recommended security companies. Venues have cooperated with other agencies to reduce drink-spiking. Since the Accord started, the rate of serious alcohol-related road injuries in Port Phillip has declined, along with drunken assaults.

Working in partnership to build safer communities is the core work of Henk Harberts, who is Chair of the Australian Safe Communities Foundation. Harberts’s work takes him around the world, but he says councils in Victoria are at the forefront because of their enthusiasm in planning issues and resolving local conflicts.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) has taken an active role in Safe Communities. The MAV asserts that local government plays a critical role in creating and maintaining safe communities in partnership with government and local agencies.

‘People understand that it’s important for local governments to play a leadership role’

The costs from alcohol-related harm are second only to tobacco nationwide. And to try to deal with their share of the costs, some local governments have introduced a ‘vomit tax’. This ‘delightful’ term originated from Greater Shepparton, says Harberts, where a rate was introduced to clean up the main streets around nightclubs and venues. Variations of that tax have been used in other areas, including Geelong. LaTrobe City is investigating a similar tax for its problem nightspot areas.

Professor John Toumbourou, Chair in Health Psychology at Deakin University, recently reviewed local government work in alcohol harm reduction in north-western Melbourne. He says the local governments in this area have been inconsistent in the way they have tackled problems. For example, these councils have only dealt with alcohol problems in public places or around licensed premises.

Professor Toumbourou says the North and Western metropolitan region councils need to prioritise, managing alcohol within their municipal public health plans. Local government can also work with families to reduce the frequency at which young people drink and increase the age at which they start. Reducing alcohol-related violence also needs urgent attention, he says. The North and Western regions score some of the highest rates² of alcohol-related violence in the State.

A clear link between alcohol misuse and social disadvantage was shown in the Interface Councils 2006 report.³ The highest

reported use of alcohol was in Melton Shire, which also had the highest rates of disengaged young people, out of school and work. Melton Shire has initiated the Common Solutions to Common Problems project, partnering RACV, TAC and VicHealth with support from the DHS. The project is part of a collaborative effort to address the risk factors among young people which can lead to alcohol misuse.

The City of Darebin has the second-highest rate for alcohol-related deaths out of the 21 councils in Melbourne. This spurred Darebin to embark on an ambitious strategy to address alcohol harm, by limiting the number of large-volume discounted liquor outlets.

It has recently stopped one and hopes to prevent more setting up.

The Mayor of Stonnington, Cr John Chandler, believes it is important that councils work together. The City of Stonnington is working with the Inner City Entertainment Precinct Taskforce (ICEPT) and the Inner Melbourne Action Plan (IMAP).

One of the councils reviewed by Professor Toumbourou was Maribyrnong. Mayor Cr Michael Clarke says his council has a long-standing commitment to a harm minimisation approach to all drug misuse, including alcohol and tobacco. "Many local councils around Australia are looking seriously at issues such as alcohol consumption and developing innovative community-based solutions with limited resources. All levels of government need to work together on these important public health issues," Cr Clarke adds.

Cr Ray agrees that there are increasing expectations from the community, State and Federal governments that local government will take up the slack in a range of social policy areas. But, he says, there's not adequate funding.

"Local governments have got it. The penny has dropped, they know there's a direct link between accessibility to some products and the harm caused," says Cr Ray.

Antony Balmain works as a journalist, is Media Coordinator at VicHealth and runs a media and documentary film business, Conscious Productions.

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ALCOHOL AVAILABILITY

Alcohol is widely available in Victoria through more than 19,000 licensed outlets, including on-premises liquor outlets (pubs, bars, clubs and restaurants) and packaged liquor outlets (bottle shops and bulk stores). VicHealth is concerned about apparent links between the growth in the number and density of outlets and an increase in the prevalence of harmful consumption of alcohol in Victoria. A recent report identified the number of licensed premises per local government area (LGA) in Victoria, compared to the number of 15–24-year-olds in those areas.

Top 5 licensed premises per LGA (Rural)

LGA	Number of youth*	SEIFA# score 2001	Licensed premises per 10,000 15–24 yrs (2006)
Alpine	1,280	1,002.84	1,814.63
Strathbogie	1,352	925.48	1,099.04
Hepburn	1,641	950.22	1,023.30
Murrindindi	2,927	966.8	999.83
Indigo	1,578	986.51	978.57

Top 5 licensed premises per LGA (Metropolitan)

LGA	Number of youth*	SEIFA# score 2001	Licensed premises per 10,000 15–24 yrs (2006)
Melbourne	20,444	1,144.92	766.77
Port Phillip	10,362	1,135.2	625.68
Yarra	10,335	1,104.73	621.05
Mornington Peninsula	16,459	998.28	402.05
Stonnington	13,867	1,168.52	369.27

* Population estimates for young people aged 15–24 years as at 30 June 2004

Socio-economic indexes for areas

For a full copy of the report *Alcohol use and related harm among young people across Victorian local government areas 2006* go to: www.turningpoint.org.au/library/vas08.pdf





Fermenting change

It's early days but the culture of drinking is under scrutiny.

There is a shift happening. If you watch closely, and listen beyond the din of clinking glasses, you can detect it.

The cultural attitudes to drinking – entrenched in Australia for decades – are being challenged. A range of organisations are taking positive steps to resist the notion that excessive drinking is an inevitable part of our culture.

In October 2007 the National Health and Medical Research Council proposed new alcohol guidelines for low-risk drinking. The draft guidelines recommended two standard drinks or fewer consumed in any one day as acceptable for both males and females. Any drinking above that recommendation would increase the risks to health and social wellbeing. The guidelines also recommended that pregnant women or children under 15 should not drink at all. This was a significant shift in thinking and was based on a rigorous assessment of available evidence. Previous guidelines – endorsed five years ago – had been criticised for being as murky as the ‘alcopops’ so fashionable these days. They carried several layers of recommendations and different suggestions on what represented low-risk drinking for men and women, a contrast to the new draft guidelines which stipulate one universal standard for all adults.

The draft guidelines arrived at the end of a year which had provided many pointers to changing community sentiment.

In January, 2007 Trinity Grammar – one of Melbourne’s most exclusive private schools – produced *A Parents’ Guide for the Prevention of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Use* to support parents wanting to make responsible, informed decisions about their children’s exposure to drinking. The idea came from the school’s deputy headmaster, Simon LePlastrier, and was embraced by parents grappling with the issue. In the City of Stonnington, a group called Reclaim Chapel Street was established. It gathered 2500 signatures requesting local control over liquor licence planning and the curtailment of 24-hour licences in the area. Originating primarily to restore some sense of order in the area after hours, the group was indicative of a debate emerging in inner Melbourne. What cost is the community prepared to bear for an entertainment culture marketed as ‘always-on’?

In July 2007, Andrew Demetriou, CEO of the Australian Football League – Australia’s biggest sporting body – made a statement that was reported in *The Age*: “We’re not saying ‘don’t drink alcohol’ but there are certain things that we can all do as an industry that revolve around responsible drinking.” He called it a watershed moment to



Historically, alcohol and sport are closely linked in Australia. Changing the culture around excessive alcohol consumption will take time, but the signs are encouraging.

IMAGE: NEWSPIX

tackle the issue. The AFL commissioned VicHealth Fellow, Dr John Fitzgerald to research the issues surrounding alcohol and the sport to ensure its policies would be based on solid evidence. Demetriou's comment was a big statement for a prominent organisation to put on the public record. It signalled its preparedness to be proactive in investigating the issue, and investing time and resources to ensure its response was appropriate.

The Australian Drug Foundation (ADF) targeted the workplace for action through its recent alcohol and work project. "There was a glaring lack of information about the impact of alcohol use on the workplace," says the ADF's Mark Durran. It not only rectified that problem, but also reinforced to a network of union, industry and government representatives an understanding of the work environment as an important influence on drinking behaviour. The message, based on research from the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA), was that the focus should not just be on work hours (do the employees drink at work?), but the social norms and expectations within a workplace that created a drinking culture; for example, Friday night drinks. In fact, relatively little alcohol is consumed during working hours. More significantly related to the work environment is drinking occurring before and after work.¹ The project, states Durran, was a scene-setter, the first step in an issue sure to develop.

The scope of the research is changing too. Researchers are looking beyond individual drinking behaviour to environments where drinking occurs – both physical and cultural. For instance, football sporting bodies – whether AFL, rugby or soccer – are

GOOD SPORTS PROGRAM

The Good Sports Program has shown that cultural change can happen within domains traditionally associated with excessive drinking. With practical support and reassurance many sporting clubs throughout Victoria have reinvented themselves, transforming from boozy barns to respected, thriving community centres.

State Manager Rod Glenn-Smith says the change occurred from the bottom-up. Research was commissioned after police expressed concern that sporting clubs were engaging in behaviour that contradicted licensing requirements. Practical interventions were suggested and a pilot project began. It involved 25 sporting clubs across the state. "The clubs needed more than just a policy for alcohol management, which was a typical way sports were dealing with issues within clubs," says Glenn-Smith.

The first step was to ensure clubs had attended to the basics: having, displaying and adhering to the conditions of a licence; and providing Responsible Serving of Alcohol (RSA) training to volunteers within the club. Once the basics were in place other elements were introduced: how people get home safely, provision of food, alternative non-alcohol revenue streams. "You have to say 'look, we're not trying to dry you up'. We're saying don't rely so heavily on alcohol sales to fund what you do. Look at how the place has become more attractive to other groups. It is certainly not through selling a lot of grog," says Glenn-Smith.

Glenn-Smith cites North Eltham Wanderers cricket club as an example. As alcohol-related revenue within the club decreased by 30%, it increased revenue through the canteen and non-alcohol products such as coffee by 35%. A group of older members act as an on-call taxi-service from the club ensuring young members who have a few drinks get home safely. As its values have become more aligned to families and local businesses within the community, sporting clubs have become hubs for positive local activity. "It's a sporting club, not a pub and that is a big wake-up call for many sporting clubs," says Glenn-Smith.

becoming more aware of how particular drinking cultures relate to sport, causing decisions that may not be in the best interests of the individual, the club or the code. Monash University's Dr Jo Lindsay is investigating the drinking habits of young people in a research project titled Great Night: The cultural drivers of alcohol consumption among young people. Lindsay is asking about why young people drink, in an attempt to understand potential interventions that might reduce risky behaviour. It's a widening of the scope of investigation that will prove significant over time.

Don't expect miracles – it's early days yet. Rod Glenn-Smith, Victoria's Good Sports Program State Manager, says one thing is certain: changing the culture around alcohol takes time. But the signs are encouraging.

Peter Ryan is a writer with the AFL Record.

To find out more about the Good Sports program go to www.goodsports.com.au

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Getting smashed HAS ITS PRICE

‘A rite of passage’, ‘part of the social fabric’ and ‘a way to be grown-up’ – given the role alcohol plays in our society, is it any wonder young Australians drink?

According to Yvonne Bonomo, physician in adolescent medicine and addiction medicine at St Vincent’s Hospital in Melbourne, testing limits is part of the process of maturation into adulthood. “Apart from wanting to try new experiences, young people drink for the same reasons as adults – to relax, to be sociable or to drown sorrows. Adolescent drinking attitudes are also influenced considerably by adult drinking behaviour,” she says.

What is increasingly alarming, though, is the amount of alcohol being drunk and the age at which young people begin to consume it.

Current data on youth alcohol use indicates widespread patterns of early-onset, regular binge drinking. Recent Australian research revealed that young people aged between 14 and 29 have the highest rate of alcohol consumption in the country. One in 10 young people aged 14 to 19 drink at risky or high-risk levels weekly.¹ Among 12- to 15-year-old girls and boys who drink, the proportion who do so at risky levels doubled between 1984 and 2005.²

“It’s important to remember that when we point to ‘risky’ levels, we’re talking about what is considered risky levels of drinking in adults. We’re still learning about the damage alcohol consumption can do to an adolescent, whose brain is still developing,” says VicHealth’s Senior Program Advisor on Tobacco and Alcohol, Brian Vandenberg. “We now know that young people who regularly misuse alcohol risk becoming adults with multiple health and social problems – if they reach adulthood,” he adds. “A recent government report revealed that there have been 194 deaths of young people in Victoria attributed to alcohol in the past four years. That’s almost one death a week.”

Hospitalisations in Victoria due to alcohol have increased by 33% over the last five years, driven particularly by increasing rates of harmful alcohol consumption among females.³

Commercial venues use a wide variety of strategies to create an appealing nightlife experience conducive to drinking and socialising, according to Jo Lindsay from Monash University’s School of Political and Social Inquiry. In her study, *Drinking in Melbourne pubs and clubs: A study of alcohol consumption contexts*, Dr Lindsay found that music, lighting, the placement of furniture and efficient service were used to manage the social spaces within venues and encourage uninhibited behaviour and increased alcohol consumption.

“The impact of various marketing techniques, such as drink promotions, along with social practices like drinking in rounds and ‘shouts’, should not be underestimated when examining young people’s alcohol consumption,” Dr Lindsay adds.

Nonetheless there is a growing awareness within the community of the link between alcohol consumption and its health impacts.

A study published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in September 2007 showed that 85% of young people and their parents knew that drugs such as alcohol, marijuana and tobacco were linked with poor mental health outcomes. However, this did not mean that they were well informed about the specific risks associated with these drugs, says Principal Researcher Dan Lubman of the ORYGEN Research Centre at the University of Melbourne.

“We now know that the brain is more sensitive to the damaging effects of alcohol and drugs during adolescence, with studies consistently showing memory and learning impairments among adolescents who regularly drink heavily,” Dr Lubman says.

“We are talking about subtle deficits that can really affect a young person’s developmental plans,” he added.

According to Brian Vandenberg the focus must be on delaying the onset of drinking. “The later people start, the less likely they are to engage in what is considered risky levels of drinking as adults.”

Dr Bonomo concurs and adds that the onus is on the adult community to educate young people about healthy levels of alcohol consumption and that messages must be credible, consistent and based in a variety of contexts.

Robyn Thompson is a journalist and Media Coordinator at VicHealth.

For more information on levels of risk and the risk of harm from short and long-term excessive drinking see www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/guidelines

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IMAGE: NEWSPIX

Young people talk about DRINKING

HITTING THE BOTTLE YOUNG

Barely 16, Corey waits in the carpark of the local bottleshop for a customer to buy his 'goon' for the night. Caitlin takes a bottle of vodka from her dad's bar and hides it in her schoolbag. Celebrating his 18th birthday, Joshua decides to have a big night with his mates, sculling jager bombs. Plain orange juice is 21-year-old Nicole's choice, who avoids a splitting headache next day.

Young drinkers are everywhere. It seems relaxed rules in the household and a focus on the dangers of illicit drugs have made alcohol consumption more acceptable. Many start drinking at an increasingly young age. Some stay alcohol-free, but they don't feature in the popular press. The media has said a lot recently about young people and alcohol – so I decided to hear what the young people themselves had to say.

UNDERAGE DRINKING

Probably one of the most dangerous and common 'risky behaviours' among young people is underage drinking, with 14- to 29-year-olds having the highest rates of alcohol consumption in Australia.¹ Certainly most people I spoke to had started drinking 'underage'.

Michael is 15 and has just started part-time work on weekends, which seems to disrupt his drinking patterns. "I get drunk at most parties; I usually don't drink if I have to work the next day. If I know I'm going to have a big night I'll just tell work I can't do the shift."

The sweet, ready-to-drink beverages targeted at young women are making them heavier drinkers than their male peers. "Sometimes at parties girls have drinks, lolly-water stuff like Vodka cruisers," explains 16-year-old Hannah.

Being underage is merely a hurdle for determined drinkers. A recent survey of Victorian secondary school students revealed that the most common places 16–17-year-olds got their alcohol was licensed liquor stores and drive-in bottle shops.²

Tall and strongly built 17-year-old Matthew has fooled bottleshop assistants for over a year. "I usually don't get asked. If they ask for ID I just say I left my licence at home with my keys to prevent me from drink-driving," explains the year 11 student.

Flexible parents and older siblings are also tools for underage drinkers. "My mum buys it for me," says Caitlin, 16. "She knows I am responsible so she limits me to a four-pack of cruisers. I usually scab off other people though when I get to the party. Four drinks? What's that going to do?"

"My older brother has been buying my drinks since I was about 14," says 16-year-old Paul. "He's pretty laid back and he gets drinks for my mates who don't have older brothers or sisters."

REASONS BEHIND DRINKING

Whether through peer pressure, parental guidance, advertising or role models, young people rarely take up alcohol without any influence at all. In my experience, most people think it is normal, just something you do when you go out. Many rely on drinking to have a good time, which is disturbing when you look at their age.

"I feel more confident when I drink," says Michael, a year 9 student, "if I go to a party and it's not that good, at least you know you can have a good time if you're drinking."

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Recent debate about teenage binge drinking has highlighted some relaxation of traditional parental boundaries. Describing a common practice of the majority I interviewed, Caitlin says: "My mum and dad let me drink when they are around, because they think it's better to get used to alcohol in a controlled environment."

But 14-year-old Elise, whose parents refuse to succumb to pressure from their daughter's peers, thinks it's good that her parents are stricter. "Some people say, 'Oh your parents are tight' but when you look at it, the parents that don't care have their kids getting drunk and having sex and stuff people our age shouldn't be doing."

AND THE NON-DRINKERS?

Amongst the young non-drinkers I interviewed – and they were a little hard to find – most didn't think they needed to drink to have a good time.

Mark, a 23-year-old non-drinker describes how his choice creates interesting responses. "It's quite funny when people find out. It's about 90% 'Oh my god, are you serious? How do you have fun?' and 10% 'Oh wow, that's really good. Bet you save a bunch of money,'" laughs Mark, who doesn't drink because of sporting commitments.

Twenty-three-year-old student, Fareed Bilal, loves a party. Ripping up the dancefloor at some of Melbourne's most popular nightclubs, it is hard to believe he is a non-drinker. "As a Muslim I am forbidden to drink alcohol. Sometimes I make up a story when people ask why I am a non-drinker. I tell them I am a recovering alcoholic. It's hilarious. They are shocked, apologetic and so on. But what I find most interesting is they respect that more than if I tell them it is due to religious purposes," says Fareed.

Ashlea Milner (21) has worked across a range of media and is presently a roving reporter for youthcentral, the Victorian Government's web-based initiative for young people aged 12–25.

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Great sports know their **BOUNDARIES**

VicHealth – official supporter of a responsible and safe drinking culture



As part of its wider Official Supporter health promotion campaign, VicHealth recently distributed posters (shown above) to football and cricket clubs around the State that seek to promote responsible and safe drinking behaviour.

Using language of the sport itself, these posters model a healthier approach to the 'after game drink'.

VicHealth worked closely with Aussie rules football, cricket and netball to develop health promotion messages to support clubs in providing a healthier environment for their players,

officials and spectators. Issues tackled, in addition to reducing the booze culture that exists in many sports clubs, were: promoting healthy eating; barracking in positive and non-threatening ways; respecting umpires; being sun smart; and welcoming a diversity of people to your club.

We are now working with basketball and soccer (football) to develop materials particular to those sports. For enquiries contact Jackie Van Vugt, Director, Communications & Marketing, on (03) 9667 1310.

**To find out more about the wider Official Supporter health promotion campaign go to the website:
<http://officialsupporter.vichealth.vic.gov.au>**

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VicHealth News

VICHEALTH'S TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

November 1987 saw the start of a bold and innovative experiment in health promotion:

The Victorian Parliament passed the *Tobacco Act* into legislation.

The Act was groundbreaking in that it booted tobacco sponsorship out of sport and the arts and created the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), which used revenue generated from tobacco sales to promote health and support tobacco control.

Twenty years on, Victorians are reaping the benefits from that bold vision: a model that dedicated a sustained budget, brings together evidence, and brokers many partnerships across government and the community to prevent illness and promote good health.

"Small shifts in population behaviour mean big savings in health budgets. For example, programs to reduce tobacco consumption over the last 30 years cost \$176 million, but reduced health care costs by at least \$500 million and created benefits worth \$8.4 billion," explains VicHealth Chief Executive Todd Harper.

Looking forward, Todd says, "Twenty years hence, we face more challenges to our health than ever. We can't take our foot off the pedal – but VicHealth is in a position to leverage what we've learned from our successful endeavours to date."

On November 20, VicHealth hosted an event at Queen's Hall at Parliament House to commemorate the anniversary of the *Tobacco Act* and the creation of VicHealth.

Politicians past and present, tobacco control campaigners, health promotion professionals, community advocates and government policy makers were invited to celebrate the achievements of the last 20 years, and to look forward to strategies for promoting health into the future.

To complete the evenings' proceedings, awards were presented to The Hon. John Cain (Premier in 1987), The Hon. David White (former Minister for Health), The Hon. Mark Birrell (former Opposition spokesperson for Health) and Ken Wright (former National Party spokesperson for Health). The last award was accepted by Hugh Delahunty of the National Party on behalf of Mr Wright.

These awards were made to honour their key roles in shepherding the legislation through Parliament, and for their leadership and vision in promoting the health and wellbeing of all Victorians.

CONGRATULATIONS TO THESE AWARD WINNERS

We are delighted to announce that two of the eight VicHealth-funded Food for All projects featured in the recent **2007 Heart Foundation Kellogg Local Government Awards**.

City of Greater Dandenong was named a **Victorian State Winner** for the 'Healthy Eating for Children 0–5 – Peer Leader Education' strategy. The strategy was implemented to increase healthy eating for children from culturally diverse backgrounds as well as new arrival families.

Brimbank City Council received a **Victorian State Highly Commended** award for 'Welcome Kit for New Arrivals' Strategy. The Welcome Kit is a practical health and nutrition guide to improve the settlement and wellbeing for migrants and refugees and for the broader culturally and linguistically diverse population.

Both were recognised in the category of Programs that improve Heart Health in Priority groups.

AND TO THESE...

The **Planning for Health and Wellbeing Award** is an annual honour presented by the Planning Institute of Australia (Vic) with support from VicHealth. Congratulations to the following winners of 2007 awards.

Winner: City of Greater Bendigo. 'These Streets are made for walking' identifies the unique transformation the City of Bendigo will make to its city centre where the barriers to walking and cycling will be progressively removed, and active transport modes will be supported. 'Shared space' will be introduced where traffic speeds will be reduced to 20km/h and drivers will become accustomed to sharing, to modifying their behaviour and recognising the social and economic value of these spaces, without the need to ban cars altogether.

Commendations

- (a) **Bayside City Council** in conjunction with **Planisphere** for the 'Bayside Architectural Trail'.
- (b) **Hobsons Bay City Council** for their 'Ageing Well Strategy 2007–2017'.



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