

A Closer Look at Intoxication

Reflecting on a “binge culture”

Market research recently released by ALAC has highlighted the widespread and mainstream nature of risky drinking in New Zealand.

The study, “The Way We Drink: A Profile of Drinking Culture in New Zealand”, helps to overturn a common stereotype that binge drinking is largely an issue concerning young people, more often those of lower income, and mostly male. Binge drinking proved in the study to be at least as prevalent among middle-aged Pakeha especially those with high incomes, and equally common amongst women.

The study gives credence to the impression that we are, as a society, tolerant of drunkenness. While interpretation of statements like it’s ‘never okay to get drunk’ (46 percent agreed, 49 percent disagreed in the study) can be debated, few would argue that New Zealanders are generally accepting of heavy drinking. A significant number in the study admitted they ‘drink to get drunk’ (nine percent of all drinkers and a quarter of 12 to 17 year olds) - and a quarter of all drinkers appeared not to limit their drinking by inconveniences like waking up with a hangover or forgetting what they were doing. Certainly, the criteria for ‘binge drinking’ (over 7 standard drinks in a session for adults or 5 for young people) has become laughable in some circles and largely a ‘normalised’ activity in large sectors of society. This in itself must be cause for concern.

Drinking and drunkenness are deeply entrenched norms in New Zealand – the appetite for heavy drinking that was part of early pioneering life was unquenched by the brief rise of the temperance movement, and for much of last century drunkenness was commonly considered a humorous sport. It is alarming to note that per capita alcohol consumption in New Zealand has nearly doubled since pre World War 2 – a trend

shared by many similar countries such as the UK, where per capita consumption has risen by 50 percent since 1970.

Although we are now taking a more critical look at alcohol consumption, we are a long way from overturning the powerful mass media portrayal of drinking as sexy, fun or glamorous, or tough and masculine. Advertisements are now clear that a designated driver must be sober, but it still appears fine for passengers to be inebriated.

ALAC’s study highlights the obvious but all too often overlooked - that focusing harm reduction efforts on young people’s drinking ignores the messages they are often getting from their elders about the social acceptability of drinking to excess. Many, (48 percent) of the parents of ‘binge drinking’ teens in the study, saw no need to supervise their children’s drinking.

Measures to initiate change to our national drinking culture must reflect the complexity of the problem. Legislation is more than a rule book but helps to create a social climate - yet the message conveyed when the purchase age was lowered a few years ago was one condoning younger drinking. Policies and organisational practices, such as in tertiary institutions and workplaces, that don’t support drunkenness are important; as are meaningful roles in society for young people and assisting the development of strong personal skills that build resilience. Licensed premises must move into the future possibly thriving through healthier entertainment activities rather than just by liquor sales.

Host responsibility must move into our homes as well as our bars. And at an individual level, reflection on, and change to the attitudes and behaviours we are modelling to our children is critical.

LLA takes strong stance on intoxication

In recent decisions the Liquor Licensing Authority (LLA) has made statements that indicate intoxication on licensed premises is an issue the Authority will be taking very seriously.

From LLA decision number 909/2003-910/2003: “Intoxication is a form of liquor abuse. Allowing a person to be or to become intoxicated in licensed premises are among the more serious examples of a failure to contribute to the reduction of liquor abuse.

New Zealand’s drinking culture has become defined by many factors and social changes. Its manifestation is often seen in binge drinking, or drinking harmfully. If the object of the Act is to be taken seriously, then eventually standards of good drinking behaviour will have to be set. Because people are inclined to be tolerant of alcohol abuse then the focus must inevitably fall on the law.

If the law becomes tolerant towards such behaviour, then the object of the Act will lose credibility. If managers of licensed premises are shown to lack discipline, then why should patrons take the issue seriously. The behaviour currently exhibited by younger drinkers is but a symptom of the malaise.”

From LLA decision number 131/2004-133/2004: “The offence of allowing an intoxicated person to be or to remain intoxicated on licensed premises is serious enough, but may be considered less serious than the offence of supplying liquor to intoxicated patrons.

Liquor abuse, in particular binge drinking, has become a form of culture in this country. Parliament’s clear intention is to do something about that culture. The Liquor Licensing portfolio is often downgraded in busy Police stations. Provided enforcement applications have merit, they will be supported by this Authority because such applications will ultimately lead to a change of culture and a reduction of liquor abuse.”

In this case, concerning a South Auckland bar noted for heavy drinking clientele, Police acknowledged the difficulty of the premises to maintain. However, the licensee’s excellent host responsibility policy and his willingness to resolve issues, combined with a period of voluntary closure, went in his favour, and the application for suspension was adjourned for six months.

England's alcohol strategy 'does not go far enough' says Medical Academy

A long awaited strategy to deal with England's \$20 billion a year binge and chronic drinking problem has just been released by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

But the Academy of Medical Sciences, a body of leading UK medical scientists, says that the strategy, while it has produced a range of tactical measures aimed at the drinker who abuses alcohol, does not target the overall level of alcohol consumption in the population, which evidence shows is necessary to reduce health and social problems of alcohol consumption.

Britain is faced with one of the biggest binge drinking problems in Europe. More than a third of young men and a quarter of young women regularly drink more than twice the maximum recommended daily intake. Drinkers under 16 are consuming twice as much alcohol as 10 years ago and report getting drunk earlier than their European counterparts, while cirrhosis deaths have increased nine fold among young men and women since 1970.

According to public health group, Alcohol Concern, deregulation of the entertainment industry and the relaxing of licensing hours in recent years may have made matters worse.

The strategy consists of a comprehensive package of measures including: a review of the code for TV advertising and a crack down on irresponsible promotions; measures to improve early identification and treatment of alcohol problems; measures to combat crime and disorder such as increased use of fixed-penalty fines; improvement of education in schools, assistance for employees to develop workplace policies on alcohol; and encouragement of codes of good practice for retailers. The Government will also overhaul the way it presents messages about alcohol. The previous labelling of drinks in terms of 'units' with recommended intakes will be revised, as it was found its impact on behaviour was low and the message hard to apply to the realities of drinking. It will be replaced by simpler messages targeting particular groups of drinkers and focusing on the consequences of alcohol misuse rather than on alcohol intake.

The strategy also contains measures to encourage the industry to play a greater role in tackling the harm that its product creates. A voluntary scheme whereby the industry adds messages to products encouraging sensible consumption, in an agreed form, will be trialled with steps taken to examine the legal feasibility of compulsory labelling in the future. There will also be a scheme, again initially voluntary, to seek a financial contribution from clubs and pubs towards the cost of policing alcohol misuse.

The Strategy, however, does not suggest major legislative changes.

While there will be strong encouragement to display a reminder about responsible drinking on alcohol advertisements, the Strategy seems to have shied away from earlier suggestions by Tony Blair that a levy be placed on advertising to fund health campaigns.

The clear association between price, availability and consumption, is acknowledged in the Strategy, but the UK Government has steered away from using price as a key lever, a measure strongly advocated by the Academy of Medical Sciences in their recent report "*Calling Time - The nation's drinking as a major health issue*" (March 2004). The Medical Academy believes that alcohol taxes should be increased to restore the affordability levels of 1970, when alcohol products were more expensive relative to disposable income. "The evidence shows that even a modest 10 per cent increase in the price of alcoholic beverages could reduce deaths from alcohol-related conditions by up to 37 per cent and would be highly effective at dealing with under-age drinking," says an Academy spokesperson.

The Strategy acknowledges that drink-driving may be increasing amongst some groups, but falls short of advocating a reduction of the legal blood alcohol level for driving to 50 mg – another measure recommended by the Medical Academy.

Alcohol Concern describes the strategy as a 'massive step forward', while reminding that it must be matched by a commitment to speedy implementation, adequate resourcing and clear targets for its delivery.

Intoxication:

1. The action of poisoning; the state of being poisoned
2. The action of stupefying with a drug or alcoholic liquor; the making drunk or inebriated; the condition of being so stupefied or made drunk.
3. The action or power of highly exciting the mind; elation beyond the bounds of sobriety

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

Intoxication Being under the influence of, and responding to, the acute effects of a psychoactive drug. Intoxication typically includes feelings of pleasure, altered emotional responsiveness, altered perception, and impaired judgment and performance
www.addictionstudies.org/glossary_i.html

One reason I don't drink is that I want to know when I am having a good time.

~ Nancy Astor (1879 - 1964)

Son, when you participate in sporting events, it's not whether you win or lose... it's how drunk you get. ~ Homer Simpson

"One that bath wine as a chain about his wits, such a one lives no life at all."

~ Alcaeus (fl. 611-580 BC) Greek poet, satirist