

## Time to get tough on booze - 5 Oct 2009

Dr John Herron - *5th October 2009*



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The release of the National Preventative Health Taskforce report has generated some important discussion and debate on not only the value of investing in prevention, but also how best to reduce the harm being caused by tobacco, alcohol and obesity.

As Chairman of the Australian National Council on Drugs, I think I am in a good position to comment on the tackling of alcohol and tobacco related problems. In some way, I have been in training all my life to comment on these issues. As a child I was raised in a pub in North Queensland and at the age of 10 saw my first case of what was then known as 'delirium tremens', or more commonly, 'the DT's'. It made a lasting impression on me. Later, one of my first medical appointments was as an Assistant Government Medical Officer examining drunken drivers (before the days of Random Breath Tests) where I regularly witnessed the devastation wreaked by the combination of alcohol and motor vehicles. In fact, throughout my 30 year surgical career, I continually saw violence and the hopeless wasting of life from alcohol and, in another sense, from tobacco.

I have been a strong advocate to reduce tobacco smoking for many years. In 1995 I was Chairman of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee that conducted an inquiry into 'the tobacco industry and the cost of tobacco related illness'. It is a source of great pride to see that Australia probably now leads the world in having the lowest rates of tobacco smoking. Our efforts in getting these lower levels are based on a number of strategies being implemented, maintained and expanded with sustained advocacy and public support. Nonetheless, the harmful cost from tobacco remains an extraordinary burden on the health system and the community. There are, however, lessons to be learnt here for our approach to alcohol. The lead shown by the Preventative Health Taskforce warrants support.

A cursory glance at the damage from alcohol serves as a reminder of why the Taskforce has rightfully targeted many factors we need to address in Australia to change the culture of drinking which celebrates drunkenness and promotes binge drinking as some sort of rite of passage. This is a culture which has developed progressively in recent years where we now have daily reports of drunken violence affecting many, particularly young people.

- The most recent annual cost to Australian society of alcohol-related health harm, lost productivity and crime is estimated to be more than \$15 billion
- Over 3400 Australians die each year because of their alcohol consumption
- 4 Australians under 25 years of age die due to alcohol related injuries in an average week
- On average, 1 in 4 hospitalisations of people aged 15-24 happen because of alcohol
- On average 70 Australians under 25 years of age will be hospitalised due to alcohol-caused assault each week.
- One in two Australians aged 15-17 who get drunk will do something they regret.

As highlighted by the Taskforce, laws which allow alcohol advertising to be shown during the day when children are watching television because there is a sporting contest on are out of touch with community

wishes. The alcohol industry spends millions on promoting its products – and there is an obvious reason for this. The link between alcohol and sports sponsorship is again an area heavily invested in by the alcohol industry because of the financial benefit it brings to promoting their products. Many may recall when tobacco sponsorship of sports was debated, how the now familiar cry of the demise of elite sports in this country would quickly follow. Well it didn't, and won't again if alcohol sponsorship is restricted. In some way, the most debated area are the taxation schedules for alcohol. Any objective reading of the current schedules leads to an inevitable conclusion that it is, as described once by the former Treasurer Peter Costello – a dog's breakfast. As the Taskforce has rightly pointed out there is a need for the taxation on alcohol to be structured to reduce harm. This can take many forms but the base of taxation should be one determined by the volume of alcohol in a product, with the necessary adjustments to promote responsible consumption.

There can be little doubt that the damage from alcohol and tobacco demands attention and effective action. However, there is a truism in health based alcohol policy which states that the things that are most effective are the least popular and the things that are least effective are the most popular. This is why we have seen such a committed campaign from the alcohol industry to oppose changes. Changing the problems caused by alcohol misuse in our community won't be easy and will need to be a sustained response but it is something I am pleased to see that the Prime Minister and his Health Minister seem to understand – which is a very good start. It must be maintained.

Dr John Herron is Chairman of the Australian National Council on Drugs