

ABC ASP Thursday 15th September 2022

John Boffa.

Starts 1 hr. 10 mins. 42 secs in.

Ends 1 hr. 24 ins. 35 secs in

Intro: Tomorrow two months since Cth. SF provisions lapsed. Changes brought in by NTG allowed residents in town camps, living areas, outstations and Amoonguna to buy and consume grog at home for first time in fifteen years. A handful of town camps in Top End chosen to opt out and stay dry for the moment; but here in Alice Springs in the week following the changes we saw one of the Lhere Artepe supermarkets see a 300% spike in grog sales and increase in harm. Since then, seen a drop but they say they still struggle to stay under their cap of 25%. Only 25% of turnover can be in grog sales.

Also heard from Royal Aust. College of Surgeons. Said anecdotally been an increase in number of alcohol-related injuries presenting at ASP ED. But like so much it remains anecdotal. Following pressure from the new Fed. Gov., NT has agreed to collect data measuring real-time effects of the changes. CM Fyles also signalled tweaking BDR; also been suggestions of alcohol-free day. But how are things looking? Dr. John Boffa is Chief Medical Officer public health, Congress.

Q: What do we know about the impact of the changes two months on?

Boffa: Although can only talk in anecdotes and our experience, anyone in the town who's seen what's gone on in the last eight weeks would realise there's a lot more public drinking. A lot more people have come to town, camping out, and it's really clear that harms have increased. Only question is how much, which is what the data will show us.

Just say from my own personal experience as a private citizen, I live on Eastside in Gosse St. About four weeks ago I rang police on Saturday night 11:30 pm to say we had a big drinking camp over the road in the public park, then I woke up the next morning to a crime scene. At 4:30 am that morning an Aboriginal woman had been raped. Then yesterday morning I woke up again to another crime scene. Large groups of people from remote communities. Different communities. Not going to say what language groups they are, but I can tell you they are from different remote communities, not all the same. Again, we woke up to a crime scene. A woman was taken to hospital by ambulance with severe burns after rolling in a fire while heavily intoxicated. Not sure if something else happened because police would not say, but it was another crime scene. So that's just my own experience in my own neighbourhood.

Q: If they are people from remote areas camping rough around Spencer Hill area, surely shouldn't be able to buy alcohol at the moment, because they're not living in a town camp, they're not a resident of a town camp or Amoonguna, so surely they shouldn't be able to get alcohol under the current system?

Boffa: Under the current system they only need to say they're staying with family in a town camp or in a town house and by and large they're allowed to buy alcohol. Now it's not that easy. Police are trying to verify that and they can't get alcohol every time. For example, one group of people came to my house from that drinking camp over the road and asked me to drive them to Eastside to buy alcohol for them. And they said they were having trouble accessing it, so they don't get it all the time, but they're getting plenty of alcohol to have drunken parties night after night and that's been going on, on and off since these measures came in, so I think there are still barriers but a lot of remote people are still accessing alcohol.

For example, Congress had a meeting with all our remote health boards and our remote health boards are reporting across the board, there's a lot more alcohol going back to remote communities. They're also saying a lot of their community members have left and come to town with their children, with their families and they're drinking, and they're very concerned about that. So, there's no doubt that remote people – and we said this would happen – the police are doing the best they can, but with the changes in the laws their ability to stop people is very restricted. If people now tell them that they're living or temporarily staying at a town address then they're legally allowed to buy and that can't be stopped.

Q: When I go to bottle-o I am still asked for my address, where I will be drinking. Surely if someone is living rough and goes to the bottle-o, they will need to prove they are living or staying in a town camp. Surely police have to keep some level of scrutiny going?

Boffa: Look they are asking people for some evidence, but if they turn up with someone from that house, that's evidence that they're staying with them, and they vouch for them and they can buy. Or it's not that hard to take a piece of paper from a house that says – the power bill or something and that's evidence. I think the PALIs are doing what they can but it's not easy and in this new regime a lot of remote people and town people – there's a lot more access to alcohol, which is why the outlets are saying they're selling a lot more alcohol and we're seeing harm increase and we're seeing a lot more people coming back to ASP and living as itinerants in areas up and down the river bed, and from my own personal experience in my neighbourhood. And that's not coincidence. It's not that that would be the only part of ASP where that's occurring.

Q: I spoke to police yesterday to try to find out if alcohol was involved in the incident where the woman rolled into the fire and got burns to ten per cent of her body. Also, an incident on Stuart Hwy south of town end of August where a woman was hit and killed by a car. They could give me not details – people suspect that alcohol was a factor there. Do you have any information on that incident south of the Gap where that young woman did die?

Boffa: Absolute tragedy. Death of a twenty-one-year-old woman. Almost complete silence. I think it is in the public interest to know a few things. What the community is saying is that that young woman was fleeing an assault, a domestic assault on the night she died. Community is saying she was assaulted by two men, and fled, and in the context of fleeing, alcohol was involved. People were heavily intoxicated. That's what the community are saying. And that in the context of fleeing from that assault, she got hit on the road, or perhaps lay down on the road, It's not clear. The main message is, this is an alcohol-related domestic assault. It's more complex than that.

Q: All police have told me is they're investigating and they have no information other than what I've been told. You've obviously got different information. I take the point but still a lot of information we don't know about that incident. Will continue to try to get information from police. Issue of monitoring. Two months in and we know Minister Burney spoke with health groups, AMSANT and the like as well as with the NTG. Heard from Chief Minister last week that it could still be months away. What do you make of that?

Boffa: Well, this just talks about the way this was all rushed. Lack of preparation, lack of understanding, I think, of what it all meant. Like, there was all this talk that this was about social clubs in remote communities; about allowing people on remote communities to drink again in their communities. That was rubbish. That was never what this was about, so the lack of understanding. But what this was about was restoring access to alcohol at the source of supply in the regional centres. The preparation that could have been done, wasn't done.

Now obviously what we wanted was an opt-out system. We wanted the measures continued, with the capacity for people to make an informed decision to opt out. That's not what we've got. Given what's been implemented, you would have hoped that the data systems were ready to go, so the harms we're seeing now could have been monitored in real time. We're pleased there is a commitment from the Federal and Territory Governments to implement a data monitoring group. I think it's really important. We've got to look at the data. We've got to see exactly how much the harms have increased. For instance we've been told that serious harm has gone from about one a week to five a week.

Q: Who's measuring that?

Boffa: Police data. What you get charged with when you assault someone and the person could have died but didn't die. So it's – say you stab someone through the chest and they don't die, instead of manslaughter or murder you get charged with serious harm.

Q: Don't know if alcohol-related?

Boffa: When serious harm suddenly goes up, in the context of this, we can be very confident that the alcohol-attributable fraction of that is going to be extremely high. There's no doubt about that. But we haven't seen the serious harm data. It's all anecdotes again. It's all whispers behind closed doors, so we do need to get the data. We need a data monitoring group. There is a commitment from the Territory and Federal Governments for that to happen, and there are multiple data sets that need to be looked at, that's true. It does need preparation time. The data does need to be accurate.

Q: Should we have it by now?

Boffa: I think some data should be there. We could start with what is available and build on it. Need to get the group meeting and look at what is easily available. I mean, police data is available, but it's at least three months after the event. Some hospital data is available, so maybe we get started with what we've got while we build the data base. But obviously we need to look at child neglect data, child protection data, protective custody data. There's a whole range of data sets we need to look at to get a handle on what's going on here. But as I said at the start of the interview, people's experience doesn't lie.

I think anyone in the street would tell you what they've seen since these changes came in. I mean we get how concerned some people are about the discriminatory nature of these

polices. It's always a trade-off. There is discrimination in the Stronger Futures legislation. No doubt about that. Question is, is it positive or not?

Q: Reality is we know NTG is not going to roll back what they've done already. What else could happen? We know Lhere Artepe have three bottle hops. They are consistently breaking their 25% turnover cap. Should they close early? Have a grog-free day if they want to avoid this?

Boffa: Absolutely. Caps put in place for a reason, so trading hours need to be reduced if they've gone over. Maybe a day...there's strategies that need to be put in place.

Q: Won't people just go to the big ones? Woolies, Coles, hotels? Still buy but not from a locally-owned company?

Boffa: That might happen, but some evidence from previous data that if some people can't get it from their local bottle-o, some people don't walk the extra couple of kilometres to town every day, so I think any degree of supply reduction is useful, and I think they have to stay under that cap. It's very important.

Q: Senator Jacinta Price introducing a private members' Bill to have bans reinstated across the Northern Territory. Support that?

Boffa: Congress' position has been that we supported these measures continuing but with an opt-out provision, so any approach by anyone that's going to see that implemented, we support. I still haven't seen it, but anything that leads to an opt-out system, we think is what's needed.

Q: Try to talk to her tomorrow. Apart from tweaking the BDR, what's something the NTG could do right now to make people safer in Alice springs?

Boffa: That's the sixty-four million dollar question. Everyone's well-intentioned. Everyone wants to find ways to reduce the harm that's been caused by removing this legislation but what makes the difference? When you open up supply at source and you see what's going on, what's going to make a difference? All sorts of things have been tried to stop people coming to town, but people are still coming to town and we're hearing that from our remote health boards, in significant numbers. So, although people are well-intentioned, I think the sixty-four million dollar question is, what can you do once the alcohol's been sold and it's in people's hands, and it's being drunk and it's been taken remotely, remember...

Out of time. Ends.
