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To: Parliament of Australia
Senate

From: Judy Finnigan
Psychologist (Reg. PS0077645)
Drug and Alcohol Specialist
CBT Clinical Psychology Center
28 Harrow Rd.
Stanmore, NSW
0407 017 410
jfinnigan@aapt.net.au

Submission: Inquiry into Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill

In this submission I would like to address a number of issues that are relevant to the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill and the consequent parliamentary decisions made in relation to reducing the toll from alcohol consumption in Australia.

The points I raise here reflect the evidence gained from “Reducing the Risks: A focus group study of young women’s drinking behaviors and their perception of risks” (2006) (see attachment) This project was conceived by Northern Area Drug and Alcohol Services and Health Promotion Services in response to current statistics showing increased alcohol consumption trends among young women aged 18-24. Although stage one of the project provided much evidence highlighting issues around young women’s risk and high risk drinking, the project was not funded by area health services to continue despite the strong lobbying of Drug and Alcohol Services, Health Promotion Services, Women’s Health, and other key stakeholders. In this submission I would like to enclose a copy of “Reducing the Risks” as the paper addresses the terms of reference of your inquiry into alcohol risk drinking among young people.

The goal of our focus groups was to gain information and evidence from young women regarding “risk drinking” behaviors in women age 18-24 years. This information would help us design a health promotion strategy to reduce the risks associated with high levels of alcohol intake for these groups. The focus groups explored a number of questions;

1. What is the pattern of young women’s use of alcohol including where and how and who is involved when they drink alcohol.
2. What is their current knowledge of the risks and consequences of risk (binge) drinking for this age group.
3. What are their reasons/causes for high and escalating levels of alcohol consumption
4. What can we do to reduce the risks of high levels of alcohol consumption for this population?

We also asked the groups about their response to previous drug and alcohol education in schools and previous advertising campaigns, and whether these campaigns had any effect on their alcohol consumption levels. Essentially, young people have a high degree of knowledge of the risks associated with alcohol use, not only are they aware, but they put much energy into protective strategies for themselves and their friends when they drink. However, such strategies are ineffective as their alcohol intake increases. Many of the young women have been exposed to drug and alcohol education in the schools throughout primary and or high school. Many can recall previous advertising campaigns but feel that such campaigns had little deterrent effect on their binge drinking. A number of quotes in the document reflect current attitudes among young women to the use of alcohol.

“If you’re not going to get drunk, you may as well have soft drinks”

“Alcohol is the social lubricant, people enjoy me more if I’m drinking”

“Why have just one drink. It’s not the done thing that women only have one or two drinks”

Given the evidence, funding policies that attempt to educate young people about the risks or scare campaigns that seek to frighten them off binge drinking are pointless and a waste of money. Worse, we are left with the same problem of escalating alcohol use in our communities. I believe this document can provide your committee with a wealth of information about young people and risk drinking for both females and males. There are different gender issues pertaining to males and female risk drinking, and there are many issues, which relate to both groups equally, such as the advertising and sale of alcohol.

The role of the drinking environment is an extremely important and powerful one, which contributes to both young women and men’s risk drinking and vulnerability to harm. Young women identified exploring social and sexual relationships as central to alcohol use. Social and sexual exploration is a normal and healthy aspect of adolescent and adult development. However we no longer have the social institutions which in the past may have assumed the task of overseeing or minding the practices of social communication and sexual attraction between it’s members. Although such institutions in the past may have to some degree been repressive, they provided safety and minding of its younger members. Currently, the pubs and clubs have become the place where such social practices take place. The quotes below illustrate the degree of anxiety for young people around social contact and the role of alcohol.

“Alcohol gives you confidence to pick up guys. That’s how you might meet your boyfriend”

“The women drinkers at the pub or club get all the guys. Guys think women who drink are easy.”

“The whole dating thing is more of a challenge to males if the women is sober.”

Although we would hope that the role of such social meeting places is to provide a safe environment promoting healthy development in our young, the reality is that pubs and clubs are commercial businesses, and like alcohol advertising, exploits the “mating game” for the sake of monetary profit.

What is clear from the evidence is that interventions to reduce risk drinking for both females and males must be multi-strategic. Interventions must address a range of ideas regarding young people individually, the drinking environment, and social attitudes to alcohol consumption, which is reflected in the alcohol industries design, production, advertising and sale of alcohol. Most of all, education, health promotion campaigns and advertising campaigns must be relevant for young people and thereby touch the heart of the problem.

If a pharmaceutical company produced and marketed a drug, which caused the same level of harm and expense to our communities that alcohol causes, the drug would be taken off the market and joint actions would be taken against the manufacturer. Yet despite the increasing damage to individuals, families, and communities the alcohol industry flagrantly breaches codes of practice in both the advertising, and responsible serving of alcohol without question.

Young females and males require safe and contained environments in which to develop as social beings. This cannot be achieved in a society that abdicates responsibility (like a neglectful parent) in ways which expose young people to predatory environments and risk of long term psychological and physical harm. The cost to our country, both short and long term is far too great.

Attached is the document “Reducing the Risks; A focus group study of young women’s drinking behaviors and their perception of risks” which I hope could be of benefit to your enquiry.

Judy Finnigan
Psychologist
CBT Clinical Psychology Center
Stanmore, NSW

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