

Submission to the Senate Inquiry on The Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill

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We are a counselling and support agency for individuals and families struggling with the trauma associated with drug or alcohol abuse. We are based in metropolitan Melbourne and are funded by the Department of Health & Ageing.

As the author of this submission I should state that I have worked in this field for more than 30 years both in Australia and in the UK.

The Problem

To say that alcohol abuse is a problem in Australia is an understatement. The figures presented by Senator Fielding in his second reading speech only give a glimpse of the true story. If all deaths and injuries that are attributable to alcohol in the community were accounted for the figures would be far worse than are published on official figures. Alcohol related violence on our streets, violence in family homes, sexual assaults, underage pregnancies, and suicides. These are all areas where the effects of alcohol are grossly underestimated. Many times these things are simply recorded as per the list above and the involvement of alcohol is not mentioned therefore not being included in official statistics.

Financial Costs

The costs to Australia in terms of finance are staggering. It seems we are prepared to pay more than \$6 Billion P.A. to allow ourselves to continue this binge. The amount of revenue we receive in turn from the Alcohol industry is far, far less than this. The lobbyists for the industry are well paid and argue their case well but the fact still remains that more than 80% of street violence occurs within a few metres of licensed premises.

Education

We are in real need of a re-education campaign on the sensible use of alcohol. I say re-education because our young people have already been educated on the misuse of alcohol by almost every facet of society as they grow up. From watching family gatherings get out of hand to end of season festivities of their local football or cricket clubs, to the end of year celebrations known as Mad Monday of the professional football teams and the ensuing behaviour that we seek to excuse, to the behaviour of some politicians in the house of parliament itself.

Some anecdotes may help here.

- On a speaking engagement in Mildura I was told by the local police inspector that it was common behaviour to find groups of young people down by the Murray River at the end of the cricket season drinking from a keg supplied by the adults from the same club. The adults having set it all up and left them to it.
- When talking to groups of year 9 and 10 youth in schools I always ask them if they actually set out to just have a few drinks with their mates, or do they set out to get drunk. In every case the answer is to get drunk.
- When I am invited to speak at a Rotary or Lions club dinner the gift prepared for the speaker is invariably a bottle of wine. This is usually handed over by a very embarrassed host. I should say here that I have no problem with a bottle of wine being given to a speaker. The point is that this is the “go to” option in most cases.

The truth is that we have developed a culture in Australia that is based very much around the use of alcohol. It is past time where we took stock and had a very good look at how we might change this. The proposals in the Bill before the senate at this time are sensible and needed, although I would argue they are only a first step. These are not draconian in any measure. Any other dangerous drug on sale in our community is required to provide detailed information about that drug. Alcohol is a highly toxic drug in its own right and there is no reason why similar measures should not be imposed on it as well.

Advertising

We should take the oversight of alcohol advertising out of the hands of the alcohol industry as it has shown itself to be derelict in its duty. When the new breed of ‘alcopops’ landed on the market it was quite plain to anybody that they were aimed at young people. The industry went to great pains to refute these claims. A few years back there was a serious proposal by one

company to market their product by putting up posters in bus shelters that actually gave off a smell of the product they were advertising. It was only through the efforts of various bodies such as ours that this advertising measure was overturned, when in fact the body set up to oversee these things was not heard from.

Conclusion

As a counselling centre we see the terrible end result of alcohol abuse. Whether from marriage breakdown, physical abuse related to alcohol or simply parents sharing their deep concern about one of their teenagers who is drinking too much. We facilitate support groups for families struggling with this and hear the stories. It is time government stepped in and took this issue seriously for the sake of the community. It is time the government listened to those affected by alcohol abuse and not just the alcohol industry.

Let me finish my submission by saying that in over 30 years of treating people with alcohol problems, from street drinkers to professional people I have yet to meet a person who in our first session will admit that they are drinking too much. Are all these people alcoholics? No, but they all drink too much and are adversely affecting others.

This culture must change and this inquiry has the chance to promote such change.

This submission prepared by

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