

The Alcohol Debate

We hear a lot these days about our growing problem with alcohol. But is the problem really getting worse – and if it is – what should we do about it? Not surprisingly **Emily Robinson**, Director of Campaigns and Fundraising at Alcohol Concern and **Mark Baird**, Head of Industry Affairs & Alcohol Policy at Diageo, a major alcohol manufacturer, have differing views.



Emily Robinson, Director of Campaigns and Fundraising at Alcohol Concern

January is a good time to talk about alcohol issues. It is a time to get people's attention after the excesses of Christmas and New Year. At Alcohol Concern we have taken the opportunity to get people thinking about their drinking through our Dry January campaign, where we ask people to give up booze for a month. January also marks one year in my role at Alcohol Concern so it is a natural time for some sober reflections on our national alcohol problem.

So let us start with some truths in the bleak mid-winter. The world is round. The earth orbits around the sun. We have an alcohol problem in this country.

One year on, I am still staggered by the statistic that alcohol is the biggest killer of young people aged 18 to 24 year olds. Over a million admissions to hospital are alcohol related and at some points in any given night the majority of A&E attendances are down to booze. That is a national emergency. I cannot believe that as a country, alcohol is costing us so much: £3.5bn on the NHS, around £11bn on crime and anti-social behaviour and around 17 million lost working days to the economy. And yet we are in a time of recession and economic difficulty. That is before you get to the personal stories of tragedy; the drink driving accidents, neglected children, the accidental poisonings, the devastating alcohol addictions. Beyond

the statistics there are whole families ripped apart and lives destroyed.

This is a grave situation, it is not about whether the problem is getting worse or not, the damage being caused by alcohol right now is colossal and requires immediate action.

Last year marked a great step forward with the publication of the Government's Alcohol Strategy. Despite some obvious flaws, like the lack of action on treatment, it is, from Alcohol Concern's point of view, the best national alcohol strategy we have seen to date. There are two things that are particularly heartening about the strategy. The first is the commitment to introduce a minimum price for alcohol (MUP), the Government has accepted that alcohol is a different product to all other groceries in the shops and needs special treatment. Second, that alcohol harm is a complex problem requiring different strategies to deal with different groups of drinkers. So while MUP will have an effect on young drinkers, it is the NHS health checks which will help the over 40s. Plus of course, changes to strengthen licensing laws which could have a major impact across the board. It also, helpfully, did not put all the pressure to change on individual behaviour.

I actually do not believe this is a complex issue – quite a lot of us are



Mark Baird, Head of Industry Affairs & Alcohol Policy at Diageo

drinking too much and we should drink less alcohol for the good of our health. But on our own that is really tough to do without changes in availability, price and marketing.

For politicians, I can see why it is such a hornets' nest. On one side you have got a well resourced and powerful alcohol industry, whose old fashioned and inflexible business model relies on maximising their profits for shareholders. They are formidable opponents. And there is the fear – but what will the public think? I believe they are more up for change than politicians think.

One of the many interesting things about working for Alcohol Concern is just how much people love to talk about alcohol! From committed teetotallers to those who enjoy a tippie, our relationship with booze is of endless fascination and in my experience, people are more than happy to talk about it. And quite a lot of people are fed up. Fed up with their high streets becoming no go areas on Friday or Saturday nights, young people realising they have been sold a lie by flashy marketing campaigns and actually, with all this pressure to drink to show, we are having fun, it is quite nice to have a break sometimes.

We may love talking about alcohol, but now in 2013, it is time to have the right conversation. I hope you join us ■

Does Britain have a national drinking problem? It all depends on your definition. If 78% of us are drinking less than the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations; if underage drinking has halved since 2003 and binge, hazardous and harmful drinking are all decreasing, as are alcohol-related deaths, is that a problem on a national scale? If it is, then at least it appears to be a problem which is getting better.

However, there are areas of our country which have a higher incidence of alcohol harm than others, such as the north-west and north-east. Such areas need local, targeted and specific interventions, aimed at those who are already misusing or at risk of misusing alcohol; not unproven population-wide measures, so often favoured by those responsible for public health. Liver specialists don't employ an indiscriminate whole population approach to surgery by operating on the livers of thousands of healthy patients on the off chance that they might catch a few with chronic liver disease

So why do some persist with proposing untried approaches when I would contend that we already know what works and what doesn't? We have seven years of empirical data to refer to where alcohol consumption and risky drinking patterns have consistently fallen. In the absence of any major research project examining why this has happened, (and we should seriously question why this is the case) I would like to offer some insight. Since 2005, we have seen the formation of The Drinkaware Trust offering excellent, free, comprehensive and impartial advice and education on all matters relating to alcohol. Coupled with this we have seen more determined, sustained and targeted action by the alcohol industry in partnership with agencies including, Addaction, Mentor UK, The British Liver Trust, NOFAS, The Ascension Trust, Oxford Brookes University, BRAKE and many police forces up and down the country.

So what works and what doesn't? We know that SBIs (Screening and Brief Interventions) have a significant success rate in spotting and treating those who are misusing or at risk of misusing alcohol. We know that the Strengthening Families Programme (SFP 10-14) has a high success rate in working with families who may have substance misuse issues. We know that training midwives in how to talk to expectant mothers about the risks of drinking alcohol while pregnant produces positive results. We know that

'Lifeskills' based education programmes can avoid risky behaviour in school aged youngsters and we know that initiatives aimed at increasing safety in the night-time economy, such as Best Bar None, Pubwatch, Purple Flag, Street Pastors and Taxi-Marshalls, all reduce alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour. You will notice that none of these successful and proven approaches addresses price, availability or marketing – the so-called 'best buys'.

And what doesn't work? Advertising bans for one – a French government report concluded that "no effect on alcohol consumption could be established" in connection with the alcohol advertising ban, known as The Loi Evin. And interestingly, several French media reports in recent years have reported the growing problem of teenage binge drinking in French cities. In November, Denmark abandoned their 'sugar and fat tax' after just one year, admitting that the Government's attempts to engineer a healthier society through raising prices had failed, with the Minister for Food quoted as saying that "...we have to try to improve public health by other means."

And of course there are some approaches where we don't know if they would work or not; the main example being state controlled alcohol prices or minimum unit pricing (MUP) as it is better known. There is no evidence for this particular intervention as it has never been tried anywhere in the world and is based solely on the much maligned 'Sheffield Model'. We are often told by MUP enthusiasts that minimum pricing is working well in Canada when the truth is that the Canadian Model of 'Social Reference Pricing', which sets different floor prices for different drinks, is very different as it is not based on a price per unit and alcohol is mainly sold through state owned liquor stores. So why take a risk on an untried, untested, unproven (and probably illegal) policy when we already know what works.

The alcohol industry has already proven itself as a credible and successful partner in tackling alcohol misuse, including its involvement in the Department of Health's 'Responsibility Deal'. So I would urge all agencies to recognise this and work *with* the industry rather than blame it and attempt to exclude it from solution building. After all, no-one blames Ford or Toyota for road accidents or speeding or suggests putting up the price of petrol to deter irresponsible drivers ■

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