



# Bias clouds truth in anti-alcohol debate

By FRANK SMITH

**I**N 1921 Western Australia nearly adopted prohibition. At one stage the prohibitionist cause was only 80 votes behind, until results came in from traditionally hard-drinking towns like Kalgoorlie.

The same sentiment appears to be resurgent now, although overall alcohol consumption is static in Australia and down in the United States and most European markets.

Nevertheless, campaigners like Mike Daube from the National Alliance for Action on Alcohol are regularly quoted in the media proposing further restrictions on alcohol.

The NAAA is a coalition of more than 65 health and community organisations established in 2009 with the goal of reducing alcohol-related harm. Its members include the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, which was set up by the Australian government in 2001 to distribute funding for programs and research that aimed to prevent the harms

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## AT A GLANCE

- Few comprehensive studies completed
- Results selected to strengthen argument
- Wine drinkers rarely consume to excess

caused by alcohol and licit substance misuse.

FARE was supplied with \$120 million raised from higher taxes on full strength beer, which were later refused passage through the Senate. It is the primary funder of anti-alcohol propaganda. In 10 years it has supported 750 anti-alcohol organisations around the country.

The main battleground for anti-alcohol campaigns is health. This is probably a spill over from the highly successful anti-tobacco campaign. But while that campaign was well grounded in

science, the evidence about moderate alcohol consumption is woolly at best.

Most studies of the effect of alcohol consumption have been epidemiological. A sample population is surveyed to find their drinking habits and morbidity is recorded over time.

These studies have two problems. Firstly, alcohol consumption is self recorded and is probably only half of the amount actually consumed. Secondly, very occasional drinkers are classified as drinkers and those who gave up drinking for health reasons are classified as abstainers.

Both sides of the alcohol debate cherry pick results to fit their preconceptions.

For example, the Cancer Council claims that about 5 per cent of cancers are caused by alcohol consumption. When challenged they were unable to point to any animal or clinical studies in support of their claim, nor does the Cancer Council distinguish between heavy and moderate drinking.

Last year the United Kingdom





introduced the Public Health Responsibility Deal, which aimed to curb binge drinking by cooperation of the industry, retailers and health promoters.

"The vast majority of people (78pc) drink within Government guidelines," UK Alcohol Network chair Henry Ashworth said. "Nationally, alcohol consumption is falling and levels of binge drinking are at the lowest recorded levels amongst young people, with significantly fewer children trying alcohol compared to their peers of 10 years ago.

"But there are still too many misusing alcohol. Drinks producers and retailers are determined to help reduce these harms. Profit and social responsibility are not mutually exclusive and frankly, the industry's sustainable future depends on it playing its part."

Sensing a loss of influence on the issue, several major UK health promotion organisations refused to sign up to the deal.

There can be no doubt that

excessive drinking costs the community dearly. FARE estimates annual costs at \$14.3 billion. Workplace costs add up to \$3.5b, healthcare \$2b, road accidents \$2.2b and crime \$1.4b, while intangible costs including loss of life, pain and suffering cost \$6.4b.

An estimated 40pc of all people detained by police attribute their offence to alcohol consumption, and on average, one in four hospitalisations of young people aged 15 to 24 occur because of alcohol.

However, some of these statistics are decidedly rubbery. As sociologist Professor David Hanson of New York State University points out, an accident is alcohol related - and implicitly caused by alcohol abuse - if a driver who has consumed a drink is sitting at a red light and is rear-ended by an inattentive teetotaler.

The majority of people do not drink to excess and few of those that do are wine drinkers. The wine industry is caught in the cross fire between the health lobby and the lager louts. Wine is not a drink of choice for most

abusive drinkers.

In a peer-reviewed paper Bradley Rickard and Marco Costanigro, along with graduate student Teevrat Garg, showed that while states in the US with higher levels of total alcohol consumption have higher traffic fatality rates, the more wine consumed as a proportion of all drinks the lower the traffic fatality rates, while the opposite is true for beer and spirits.

Almost all proposals to tackle problem drinking are likely to hit responsible drinkers as well as binge drinkers. Advertising restrictions have little effect. Warning labels are largely ignored, restricting retail outlets causes inconvenience rather than abstinence and raising taxes adversely affects responsible and binge drinkers alike.

About the only action that is likely to work without causing collateral damage is the proposal by the Scottish government to impose a floor prices on alcohol.

**Details: [fare.org.au](http://fare.org.au)**



Measures that reduce dangerous alcohol consumption without impacting on regular consumers are proving difficult to find.