

Sensible drinking:

The Unit's response to the Government's review

Recently I received an invitation from the Secretariat of the Inter-Departmental Group on the Sensible Drinking Message, Department of Health, to contribute to a review of the current state of alcohol use and misuse.

Our response, with reference to young people and alcohol, was based on data acquired from Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire surveys, and concentrated on drinking at home. We feel that this aspect of 'alcohol education' is so important that it should be shared with readers.

1. We began by drawing evidence from large samples across the UK that parents' attitudes to alcohol consumption are linked to the drinking behaviour of their children.

2. This led to the implication that the parents hold an important — perhaps the *most important* — key to youngsters' drinking levels.

3. If this is so, we concluded, then any 'sensible drinking' initiatives aimed at young people *must* somehow involve their parents as well.

Working with parents

Over several years now I have spent time on many occasions working with large groups of parents at evening meetings in schools with teachers present. In general terms, parents are un-

ware of the frequency and level of consumption of young people as a group and, I suppose, some may decide that other people's children, rather than their own, must be involved.

Our data has consistently shown, across the years, that the parents of as many as 40% of the year 11 pupils do not know when they drink at home. In some cases the parents never know.

It is rare to find any parents in an audience who keep no alcohol at home. It is not so rare to find parents that do keep alcohol at home but do not drink themselves. They explain that they keep it 'for visitors'.

The climate at home

Working in support of a team of health professionals from Northumberland recently we explored data from their survey to look for links between 'the climate at home' and the levels of alcohol consumption. Our discoveries amongst their data are confirmed here in examining the 40,000+ nationwide responses gathered so far in 1994 (January–October).

It can be seen (Table 1) that the percentages of these groups are highest where less parental awareness of their children's home-drinking practice is evident. Those young people who do not drink at home at all contain the lowest number of drinkers, and the group whose parents always know if they are drinking at home contains the next lowest percentage of drinkers.

The signals here strongly suggest that the attitudes and practices within the home have an impact upon the child's behaviour — perhaps an obvious comment to make. No one has ever felt other than this, but perhaps we need to be reminded of it.

Across the years I have been drawing attention to the high levels of consumption and frequency of use of alcohol. In particular I have repeatedly shown that alcohol use is well established in the young people arriving in secondary school. Clearly the 'alcohol career' for many has started at primary school stage.

It may be that relatively few of us do provide

School year	% that drank alcohol last week					
	BOYS %			GIRLS %		
	7	9	11	7	9	11
<i>Parental attitude.</i>						
Don't drink at home	7	14	26	1	14	27
Parents ALWAYS know	38	50	67	27	42	62
Parents USUALLY know	41	68	78	41	59	70
Parents SOMETIMES know	57	69	78	45	65	69
Parents NEVER know	54	71	68	71	62	58

Table 1. The percentages of young people within each category of parental awareness that drank alcohol during the previous 7 days. It is based on a sample of more than 40,000 young people surveyed so far in 1994.

a supply of alcohol, at least deliberately or knowingly. But if the supply is abundant — at home, through easy purchase themselves or via an older 'friend', at a friend's home, at a party or disco, or in the park — then where do we stand?

A bigger problem than illegal drugs

The evidence is that our society handles its alcohol very badly. Illegal drugs are without a doubt enormously important, but, to date, are not anywhere near as damaging to our society as are the effects of alcohol.

I have recently published *Young People and Illegal Drugs, 1989–1995: Facts and Predictions*. In this text it is reported that:

- In 1993 around 30% of the 16-year-olds reported having tried one illegal drug (including solvents), while fewer than 3% of the 11-year-olds had done so.

In *Young People in 1993* we discover that:

- Around 50% of the 11-year-olds drink at home.

We are currently involved in the development of a cross-curricular programme of alcohol education in secondary schools, originally funded by Allied Lyons and now funded by the Alcohol Education Research Council (AERC). A major component of the programme is the annual survey of attitudes, knowledge and practices of the boys and girls throughout the schools.

Each year the cross-section of the school is explored, and the maturation of the young people with respect to alcohol can be examined and considered. Some of the outcome is very attractive, particularly in connection with drinking and driving. Health educators sometimes preen themselves as a reward for their persuasive education programmes. It is far more likely, however, that young people are modelling on the much improved adult behaviour of the circle of friends of their parents. Adults are much improved, but the youngsters are even more diligent than we are.

Knowing facts *can* change behaviour!

My view of the way forward is continuously to examine the data available on the behaviours in our own communities, and to ask to what extent caring people are prepared to accept the way things are.

I believe that the monitoring of attitudes and practices in our communities, if published and examined regularly, would make all caring adults and young people recognise the influence of alcohol, and treat it with far greater respect.

I foresee one major difficulty for the many of us who use alcohol abundantly. If we are to make alcohol less available to young people, it may be that it will have to be less available to ourselves. At present we should not be surprised at the very high levels of consumption and frequency of use of alcohol by young people, when we consider the 'environment of availability' for which we are responsible.

If the level of alcohol use is cut down amongst young people it will mean a substantial loss in sales, with knock-on effects with respect to jobs and taxes. Can we afford these effects? Any change we try to effect will be slow. Let's hope that, should society be persuaded to attempt this change, the investors will move their money to more health-promoting commercial interests. I am sure they will. — *John Balding*.