

## **Hard decisions needed about youth drinking.**

Psychiatrist **Grant Christie** asks whether alcohol reform is a matter of conscience or science.

Will the recent tragic death by alcohol of an Auckland teenager help us see reason? It's unlikely. Instead we will explain such events away as an unfortunate one-off, a freak occurrence.

Accepting the fact that the deceased's drinking was not unusual for a 16-year-old and that needless alcohol-related deaths occur on an everyday basis, it is not as easy as seeking solace in the erroneous belief that what happened was unusual.

For a 16-year-old living in Auckland in 2010, drinking a bottle of spirits over the course of a party is not an unusual thing to do. In the past decade drinking behaviour in the young has grown steadily more extreme and is increasingly normalised in younger age groups.

In the past it was rare to treat 18-year-olds for alcoholism, a condition that usually takes a number of years of heavy drinking to develop. These days, 15- and 16-year-olds are presenting regularly to youth addiction services, addicted to alcohol and needing alcohol detoxification and residential rehabilitation.

The kind of extreme drinking that led to the young man's death, although harmful across the lifespan, is particularly problematic for young brains, which are still developing.

The aetiology of many psychiatric disorders is explained in part by the saying "Brain cells that fire together, wire together." This axiom applies directly to addiction and by exposing developing brains to the drug ethanol we are in effect hardwiring addiction in our young, making it stick. As we pickle young New Zealanders' brains in increasing amounts of alcohol we are creating a future society of heavy dependent drinkers.

Science tells us there is a clear and dose-dependent association between onset of drinking and addiction. The earlier you start drinking, the higher your risk of alcohol dependence. The reasons for this relationship are numerous but largely related to habituation on a series of levels.

At the microscopic level, brain neurons get used to alcohol bathing their cell membranes and neural pathways responsible for reward and addiction get strengthened.

In our families children grow up around, and learn to live with drinking and drunkenness, our teenagers accept heavier and heavier drinking as a part of growing up, seeing intoxication as a prerequisite for fun and sociability.

Our communities increasingly tolerate drunkenness as part of the social framework. At some point some things will need to change. Some day we will realise that creating a generation of citizens whose main priority in life is supporting or overcoming addiction is no way to build a country.

Do we have the courage to divert a potential train wreck now, or in the true fashion of an addict, will we wait until we reach rock bottom before we realise that things will have to change?

The aim of alcohol corporations is profit and they achieve this via increased per capita consumption of alcohol. However, the science is clear that overall consumption is directly related to the amount of harm alcohol inflicts on society.

That taxpayers are paying for the monetary and social cost of an industry whose profits go to overseas shareholders should be objectionable to most of us. We need to make decisions in New Zealand's interest, rather than in the interest of foreign corporations.

But alcohol reform is a moral minefield where the ideologies of individual rights versus the common good compete and it is understandable that our politicians are reluctant to tread there. "Alcohol In Our Lives: Curbing the Harm," the Law Commission's final report on New Zealand's liquor legislation, provides our elected representatives with the perfect route around this minefield.

It is an independent, evidence-based blueprint for change that does away with unanswerable concepts of right and wrong, replacing them with quantifiable questions regarding the extent of harm, the social and financial costs to society and what measures are effective to reduce these.

Alcohol reform is a scientific issue, not a conscience issue. Leaving such an important matter to the consciences of our politicians is a mistake, especially when many of them are entertained and lobbied by the liquor industry.

We need to be guided by evidence and with the Law Commission's recommendations, New Zealand now has a clear pathway to a healthier, less alcohol-dependent society.

Do we have what it takes to make the hard decisions? Or will we succumb to addiction's seductive call, "She'll be right"?

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Auckland psychiatrist Grant Christie specialises in child and adolescent care and addictions.