



matters of substance

AT THE HEART
OF THE MATTER,
NZ DRUG
FOUNDATION.

Te Tūāpapa Tarukino o Aotearoa

Student drinking: grim and chronic
Rap's bad drug rap
Dope and academic doom
Eugenics for addicts

August 2010

Who's giving your kids alcohol?

Changes to social supply laws are among the most important of the Law Commission's recommendations. They may help reduce excessive youth drinking and would protect parental rights over who gives alcohol to their children. But in the current political environment, what chance do they have of making it into law?


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The NZ Drug Foundation has been at the heart of major alcohol and other drug policy debates for over 20 years. During that time, we have demonstrated a strong commitment to advocating policies and practices based on the best evidence available.

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Te Tūāpapa Tarukino o Aotearoa

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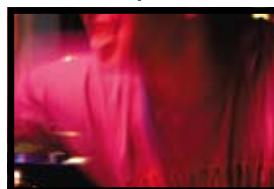
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THIS MONTH the Drug Foundation launched two exciting new websites – www.drughelp.org.nz and www.methhelp.org.nz – which are a significant enhancement to our drug information service.

The websites bring a clear and simple message to people struggling with their drug use: hope. There is hope for people whose drug use and addiction has got in the way of their relationships and other things important to them. There is hope for the family concerned about a loved-one's problematic drug use.

This message is carried by people who have been there, who have travelled the road of addiction, and are working through their recovery. Their stories tell of the good times, when the drugs were fun, when everything was going great. They also speak of when the problems began and things went pear-shaped. They share their struggles in seeking help and their journeys through treatment and recovery.

These are important stories that add more than the important message that 'treatment works'. As well as explaining about addiction treatment, the stories go a long way towards reducing the stigma of addiction by giving the problem a human face.

Too often media reports about drugs, gangs, violence and misery reinforce a very negative picture of people who use drugs. It is this stigmatisation that often

makes people needing help fearful about asking for it. We should be ashamed of the barriers that have been put in front of those looking for help.

The websites were tested before being launched. We were really pleased to have very strong, positive feedback from our 'target audience'. People who use drugs and people in recovery told us the stories were genuine, the messages were credible, and the websites were engaging. Visit them and see for yourself.

The work on the websites began in earnest in December last year, and we must acknowledge the Herculean efforts of a small bunch of people that made it possible to go live with them this month. First the web builders, Signify Ltd, who did the techie stuff, and Origin Design who got the look-and-feel perfect.

Then our advisers from across the wider alcohol and other drug sector who guided our work in the right direction, and the staff at the Drug Foundation who did the work.

An extra special thanks must go to a guy many in our sector know: Michael Bird – he was the one people were willing to trust their heartfelt stories to, and who knew the audience and how to make a resource speak to them. Michael certainly worked his magic.

Finally, we are indebted to the people who have shared their stories with New Zealand; it was a pretty brave thing to do. Happy viewing, Ross Bell. ■

Cutting Edge 2010: Development, diversity and direction for a new decade

16–18 June, Adelaide, Australia
22–25 September, Auckland
Cutting Edge is the national alcohol and addiction treatment conference. The 2010 conference will be the 15th in as many years.

www.cuttingedge2010.org.nz

Public Health Association Conference: Tomorrow for tomorrow's people

24–26 June, London, United Kingdom
22–24 September, Ngaruawahia, Waikato

The conference aims to bring together public health workers to share their stories of today to help build a health future for tomorrow.

www.pha.org.nz/phaconference.html

Australian Drugs Conference: Public health and harm reduction

25–26 October, Melbourne, Australia

This conference aims to explore challenges and set new priorities to help address the health and social implications of problematic substance use at the individual and community level.

www.australiandrugsconference.org.au

Involve: Connect: Together we are stronger

17–19 November, Auckland

Involve provides an opportunity for people who work with young people to gather together to enhance skills and strengthen connections to promote young people's positive health and development.

www.involve.org.nz

New Zealand Drug Foundation Annual General Meeting

23 November, Wellington



Our AGM is a great chance for members and friends to reflect together on an extremely eventful year and to look ahead to 2011.

www.drugfoundation.org.nz

Addiction Treatment Leadership Day

25 November, Wellington

These leadership forums bring together addiction workforce leaders from different functions: policy, planning, funding, training and education, service management and delivery, consumers and cultural leaders.

www.matuaraki.org.nz

APSAD 2010 Conference: Building on the capital

28 November – 1 December, Canberra, Australia

The Australian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs conference will focus on new treatment, prevention and policy in the areas of drug and alcohol research.

www.apsadconference.com.au

2nd Sport and Alcohol Conference: Finding the Balance

9–11 February, Auckland



The relationship between sport and alcohol will be examined. Those interested will include health educators, programme initiators, national sporting organisation representatives, academics, government bodies and athletes.

www.sportandalcohol.com

4th International Conference on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

2–5 March, Vancouver, Canada

The conference will provide an advanced forum for emerging and cutting-edge research, policy and practice that will assist governments' service systems, service providers and parents and caregivers.

www.interprofessional.ubc.ca

6th International Conference on Drugs and Young People

2–4 May, Melbourne, Australia

Themed 'Making the Connections', the conference will examine the complexity and interaction of factors that influence young people's lives and will celebrate the role young people play in addressing drug harm.

www.adf.org.au

Publicise your own event on our new-look website

www.drugfoundation.org.nz/events

The minor issue of social supply



The Law Commission says its latest report provides government with a blueprint for reducing both the short- and long-term effects of alcohol misuse on society. The Commission's review has been comprehensive and its recommendations numerous at 153. It has encouraged the government to institute its recommendations a package, but how many will actually make it into law? Proposed changes to social supply laws, for example, are a little bit 'touch and go' – and for many, this is a concern. **Rob Zorn**





“This is a really delicate balance because National is not in the business of getting into people’s homes on issues like this and telling them how to run their lives.”

Hon
Simon
Power

IF IMPLEMENTED, the 153 recommendations in *Alcohol in Our Lives: Curbing the Harm* would amount to a sweeping and radical overhaul of New Zealand’s liquor laws.

Always with its finger on what it believes to be the nation’s pulse, the popular National government was initially quick to reassure ordinary New Zealanders who like a drink. Prime Minister John Key said he didn’t believe the public was in the mood for wholesale change, and the Commission’s report had barely been released before Justice Minister Simon Power said it was “extremely unlikely” the government would act on the proposal to raise the excise tax on alcohol.

One recommendation down; 152 to go.

While the government has indicated there will be legislative change in response to the report, it has been a little non-committal in the face of widespread calls for law reform from the public and from numerous health experts. When an organised coterie of 14 prominent New Zealanders, led by former Governor-General Sir Paul Reeves, publicly backed the Law Commission’s recommendations, Power said he would “respect their views along with the views of other New Zealanders”.

This guarded approach, and the probability that the alcohol industry is vigorously asserting itself behind the scenes, leaves one wondering just how many of the remaining recommendations have a chance.

The Law Commission’s suggested changes to social supply laws, for example, have received a mixed

response from government.

On the one hand, Power told the *New Zealand Herald*, “This is a really delicate balance because National is not in the business of getting into people’s homes on issues like this and telling them how to run their lives.”

But later he told the *Dominion Post* he was having a “hard look” at present laws governing supply of alcohol to minors, especially in the light of media attention around after-ball parties for high school students.

“Currently, there are no restrictions on supplying alcohol to minors at private functions, in private homes or on unlicensed premises.”

This apparent softening of National’s non-interference stance will be welcomed by those who argue that, by failing to act on the Law Commission’s recommendations around social supply, the government would be failing to protect parents’ sole rights – in their own homes – to decide when and how their children are introduced to alcohol.

Under the current Sale of Liquor Act, it is an offence to purchase alcohol with the intent to supply it to a person under 18 years of age. Clearly, then, one can’t go into a bottle store and buy alcohol at the request of the under-age wags hanging around outside. But apart from a clear-cut situation like that, what ‘intent to supply’ means becomes a little murky, and the Act fails to provide a definition.

Of course, there are exemptions: if the supplier is the parent or guardian of the minor or if the minor is attending a private social gathering. Again, the Act fails to define at what sorts of private social gatherings one can give minors alcohol. In fact, it fails to define private social gatherings at all.

Currently, there are no restrictions on supplying alcohol to minors at private functions, in private homes or on unlicensed premises. What that means is that anyone at all at any non-public ‘get-together’, such as a party or a sleepover, can give your child alcohol. As things stand, the right of parents to choose how their children are introduced to alcohol is poorly protected in law.

This is a tad troubling. The Ministry of Health’s Alcohol and Drug Use Survey 2007/08 reported that a majority of 16–17-year-olds say they have consumed large amounts of alcohol at someone else’s home; away from parents who, *you would expect*, would implement rules around drinking and help shape responsible attitudes towards alcohol in their children.

Surprisingly, however, it would appear that, for some parents, alcohol has become the new babysitter.

According to Paul Radich, a Liquor Licensing Inspector with the Manukau District Licensing Agency, parents acting as a restraining influence on their children’s drinking is no longer the norm.

He describes a series of recent events in Manukau involving large public gatherings of drunk 15–17-year-olds where, in 90 percent of cases, the kids were given the alcohol by their parents.



“For some reason, we’ve got it into our heads as a society that this is now a ‘rite of passage’ for young people. Once you turn 16, you have the right to drink and get completely off your face in an uncontrolled environment.”

Paul
Radich

Advice for parents

The Australian Drug Foundation says it is important parents understand the critical role they play in introducing children to alcohol. Parents are currently one of the main sources of alcohol for young people, so it is vital that they teach their children about it and how to act responsibly. When it comes to teaching children about alcohol, remember the three Rs:

Relationships

Having to compete with peer pressure and popularity is no easy task for any parent, but it is important that children learn about alcohol from you rather than from their friends.

The best way to influence your child’s use of alcohol is to maintain a good relationship with them. Research shows that teenagers are much more likely to delay drinking when they feel they have a close, supportive tie with a parent or guardian.

It is also important to set a good example to your children about where, how and why you use alcohol. Young people are very good at identifying double standards, so being aware of how you use alcohol may help establish your credibility.

Restrictions

Setting restrictions and boundaries when it comes to children and alcohol is important,

but never easy, so here are some important tips to remember:

- Make your limits and restrictions as clear as possible. The smallest bit of ambiguity can be all that is needed to tempt your teenager to push the boundaries.
- Set and clarify the consequences of breaking the boundaries, what the punishment will be and how it will be carried out. If boundaries are broken, make sure you follow through with the action.
- Address the 3 Ws (when, where, and what). Your child should know at what age they are permitted to drink, where they are permitted to drink (at home, parties etc) and what they may drink, ranging from types of alcohol to quantities.

Risks

It is important children know why they should act responsibly when it comes to alcohol. Identify these risks:

- Behavioural – accidents and injuries, sex, violence and embarrassing behaviour.
- Physical – liver damage, heart and blood disorders and brain damage, as well as physical appearance.

Teenagers are usually very conscious of their image and reputation, so making them aware of these risks may act as a deterrent to drinking alcohol.

their kids off with RTDs in hand.

At another, police had to close a street after an end-of-term party got completely out of hand. Again, there was violence including throwing bottles at Police cars.

“For some reason, we’ve got it into our heads as a society that this is now a ‘rite of passage’ for young people. Once you turn 16, you have the right to drink and get completely off your face in an uncontrolled environment,” he says.

He’d like to see the introduction of a legal drinking age, rather than just a purchasing age.

“If kids are going to drink, then they need to be that certain age – whatever parliament decides that age to be.”

Currently, it is an infringement offence for anyone under 18 to drink in public unless they are accompanied by a parent or guardian. The Law Commission is recommending that it should become a full offence for anyone under the age of 20 to drink or possess alcohol in a public place, even if accompanied by a parent or guardian.

This may remove some of the grey areas for authorities who have to deal with young people drinking in public and help force the problem back into the home – or at least out of the car parks.

One cannot write about social supply laws in New Zealand in 2010 without mentioning student after-ball parties. These have featured heavily in the news this year because the school ball season started just weeks after a 16-year-old King’s College student downed a bottle of vodka and subsequently died in his sleep.

A number of after-ball parties were shut down or cancelled after a Manukau District Licensing Authority and Police crackdown in Auckland. Their legality is questionable because they only loosely fit the definition of a private social gathering, and the fact that students pay to get in and then drink for free means

At one recent event, up to 500 young people had gathered at a car park where Radich described the scene as absolute chaos, with fights and kids passing out in alcoholic stupors. Nevertheless, a steady stream of parents drove in and dropped



“What says ‘normal’ to our kids more than a range of products all their own?”

Anna
Kenna

they may technically be selling alcohol to minors.

A group of King’s College parents came under heavy fire in the media for attempting to organise a supervised after-ball party for the school’s students. To gain entry, kids under 18 would have had to front up with a parent. If over 18, a signed permission slip from parents would have been required.

It is not hard to understand what these people were thinking. Many parents are probably resigned to the fact their kids are going to go out and get trashed after their school ball and there’s little they can do to stop it. Surely it’s better to provide them with a venue where they can drink with supervising adults present, including bouncers to keep the gate crashers out and paramedics to revive the ones who managed not to be so well supervised. The alternative is to have them heading into town where all sorts of trouble awaits in the early hours of the morning.

But Radich says this sort of thinking is a mistake and that parents should not see after-balls, at which alcohol is served to minors, as the ‘lesser of two evils’.

“After-balls have been a real eye-opener for me. I didn’t understand the extent of the problem until I became involved with them over the last three years.”

He told the *Howick and Pakuranga Times*, “When you get a large group of people together, not just teenagers, who are consuming alcohol, the risk always increases in terms of those alcohol-related harms. Students are at more risk with these after-balls. It’s a pointless argument to say, ‘Well, if we don’t get

booze at after-balls, we’ll go to town’.”

He described a statement by two Auckland teenagers that having alcohol banned at their after-ball party had “crushed everybody’s dreams” as deeply worrying.

“It’s a real concern when underage kids feel it’s the end of their dreams if they’re denied alcohol. By organising parties for them where they can drink, we’re sending them all the wrong messages and reinforcing their belief that you can’t have a good time without alcohol.”

Auckland Mayor John Banks has also weighed in with similar sentiments. In a *New Zealand Herald* article, he wrote that organising after-balls with alcohol for students sends all the wrong signals around moderation and responsible parenting and that he couldn’t understand why kids need to be out drinking early in the morning.

Well, here’s why, perhaps.

Anna Kenna is a Kapiti Coast writer and mother to two daughters who have only recently left school.

She says parents have a real battle fighting the normalisation of alcohol to teenagers and that she’s blown away by the wide range of alcoholic products that seem to have been developed just for them.

“What says ‘normal’ to our kids more than a range of products all their own? There’s even pastel pink cranberry stuff that seems especially for the girls,” she says.

“On the one hand, we’re putting this stuff out there for them and then we’re turning around and trying to tell them not to drink too much. This sort of

pressure wasn’t around when we were their age.”

She says it’s hard for parents to compete with the way alcohol is glamorised and describes a full page advertisement in a women’s magazine featuring a slim and seductive woman and associating a pre-mixed alcohol product with female empowerment.

“I immediately thought what a contrast this image is from the reality of where a lot of young girls who see it will end up – spread-eagled and unconscious on Courtenay Place, lying in their own vomit, or locked up in a police van. There’s a real contrast between the glamour and the reality for many young people who drink.

“Somehow we need to get the message out that drunkenness isn’t cool, but you feel helpless against the power of marketing. It’s so incredibly pervasive: magazines, television, the internet, alcohol-sponsored ads and events popping up on Facebook. Everywhere they look, alcohol is waved in front of them like some sort of ticket to a good time.

“How do we tell our kids this is wrong when we do the same thing? As adults, we speak with a forked tongue.”

Through its consultation with parents, principals and young people, the Law Commission has been made well aware of the extreme pressure there is on young people to drink. In May, Cate Brett, a Senior Researcher and Policy Adviser with the Law Commission, told the *New Zealand Herald* parents were looking to the law to help relieve this pressure and to re-establish some parameters around



“The idea that parents can prevent alcohol misuse in their children by teaching them to drink responsibly at home – the so-called European model – is popular but not well supported in reality.”

Sarah
Jaggard

Brooke



Brooke, a 16-year-old and student at MacLeans College in Buckland's Beach, provides a young person's perspective – something she says is almost always missing from the debate.

Brooke confirms that a lot of young people get their alcohol from friends who are 18 but that a lot of 16-year-olds also have fake IDs. She says her parents will sometimes buy her alcohol for special occasions, but they always do it (usually a four-pack of RTDs) so they know how much she is drinking.

She reckons she has pretty responsible attitudes towards alcohol.

“They have come from my parents. They know young people are going to drink, but they have chosen to trust me, and I don't want to lose that trust. I know if I come home wasted they will not buy me more. Alcohol's not something I want to abuse anyway. I've seen guys getting carried away in ambulances and having their stomachs pumped, and it's really gross.”

Brooke has had one bad experience with alcohol that freaked her out.

“I couldn't remember what had happened to me, and that was really scary. Sometimes it takes a bad experience to know where your limit is.”

She says most of her friends' parents are also

responsible when buying alcohol for their kids. But sometimes, when parents say no, kids just go to other places, and parents end up not knowing what they are drinking.

“If after-ball parties are cancelled, kids will go off and drink where they aren't supervised. It's far better for them to drink in an environment where they can be supervised and where limits are put on what can be drunk and you can't leave without parental permission. If you're out drinking and walking the streets, it's easy to get into trouble, especially if you lose your friends.”

“Parents don't realise there are going to be far worse outcomes if kids drink at other places and Police are going to have more on their hands than at a controlled after-ball.”

When it comes to one day introducing her own kids to alcohol, Brooke says she will let them drink under her supervision on family occasions.

“I plan to teach them about the effects of alcohol and the dangers around getting drunk. I think the best way parents can give their kids good attitudes towards alcohol is by setting them a good example, not drinking a lot themselves. I think they should set really clear but strict rules for them and then trust them to keep to the rules but not give them very many chances if they stuff up.”

Brooke thinks it's really important that adults understand kids' point of view.

“We understand theirs. We do get it that alcohol can be dangerous, but adults have to understand that kids can also enjoy alcohol, and why shouldn't we be allowed to if we can do it responsibly?”

their kids' use of alcohol.

The Law Commission is proposing a raft of changes to help address problematic youth drinking including raising the purchase age back to 20 and banning advertising that especially appeals to people under 20.

In terms of social supply, it is recommending “it become an offence for any person to supply alcohol to a minor on private property unless that person is the minor's parent or guardian or is a responsible adult who has the approval of the minor's parent or guardian.”

But it would also go one step further by requiring both parents and those to whom they give their approval to ensure alcohol is supplied in a responsible manner. Its proposed test for ‘responsible supply’ would include adequacy of adult supervision, quantity supplied, duration of supply, presence of intoxication and availability of food.

Such regulations would make it an offence for parents (or other authorised adults) to supply under-age high school students with alcohol at parties, including after-balls where there is not adequate supervision of its consumption. Anyone who supplied alcohol to under-age high school students would commit an offence unless they had the clear authority of each student's parent or guardian.

Changes the Law Commission is proposing to licensing laws would clarify the illegality of after-ball parties. Attendees having to produce a ticket or voucher to gain entry would mean these were public events requiring a special licence.

Its proposals also address the concerns the Law Commission says it

“Of most concern is that the brain is likely to be more sensitive to damage from alcohol in childhood and adolescence as it is still developing.”

Sarah
Jaggard

heard from parents who were angry about their inability to prevent other people supplying their child with alcohol without their permission and often with little or no adult supervision.

Parents may also find that stricter and clearer laws around supplying alcohol to minors would alleviate a lot of the pressure they feel from their children to supply them – or their friends – with alcohol.

There are three states in Australia that have introduced social supply laws akin to what the Law Commission is recommending here: New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania. Examining the differences in each state’s laws helps illustrate how important it will be for New Zealand to get its legal wording right.

Section 117 of the New South Wales Liquor Act states a person cannot sell or supply liquor to anyone under 18 years of age unless they are that person’s parent, guardian or spouse. There is, however, no requirement for that parent, guardian or spouse to supply the alcohol in a responsible manner and no clear definition of what constitutes a guardian. The regulation has been in force since 1982, but Sarah Jaggard, the Australian Drug Foundation’s Community Mobilisation Policy Officer, says not many people know about it, and no studies have been done into its effectiveness in preventing harm.

In Queensland and Tasmania, the introduction of social supply legislation has been more recent, with both states bringing in new regulations in 2009.

The Queensland Liquor Act requires

that an adult not supply alcohol to a minor at a private place unless the adult is the “responsible adult for the minor”. As Jaggard points out, however, the law doesn’t address whether approval can be transferred to someone else by the responsible party. It would be reasonable to assume that any an adult who has formal charge over a young person on a specific occasion is acting *in loco parentis*. So when your child ‘stays over’ at the home of a friend, he or she is subject to supervision by the parent (or equivalent) of the friend and may be given alcohol by that person.

Queensland does have a second offence of irresponsible supply, which occurs when an adult, including a parent or guardian, does not ensure minors consume alcohol safely and in reasonable quantities.

Tasmania’s laws are similar but have the added requirement that a person supplying alcohol to a minor must also have the permission of the responsible adult.

The host of a private party would therefore have to gain prior approval from the responsible adult of each young person who attends the event before they could be supplied with alcohol. The approval may be in verbal, written or electronic in form, but the onus is on the host to ensure the approval is legitimate.

Jaggard says that, while these laws are too new for there to have been any significant studies into their effectiveness, the Tasmanian version is the best legislative model of the three, providing the greatest clarity in terms of how and by whom kids are introduced

to alcohol. Clearly, New Zealand’s Law Commission would agree.

However, parents wanting a set of laws such as these to help protect their sole right to introduce their children to alcohol may face another dilemma – whether they should be doing so at all.

The Australian Drug Foundation recommends that not only should parents and their equivalents be required to introduce alcohol responsibly, they should also be required to do so in accordance with the guidelines of Australia’s National Health and Medical Research Council. These guidelines say that, due to alcohol’s harmful effects upon the young, the best option for people under 18 is not to drink at all.

Jaggard says the idea that parents can prevent alcohol misuse and related problems in their children by teaching them to drink responsibly at home – the so-called European model – is popular but not well supported in reality.

“Recent evidence is pretty clear that drinking with your children in adolescence actually increases the likelihood that they will also drink outside the home.”

She cites a recent Dutch study of 428 families that found that teenagers who drank with their parents were at greater risk of developing alcohol-related problems including trouble with school work, missed school days and getting into fights with others.

A recent Australian study, which tracked young people and their drinking patterns from 14–21 years, showed drinking is linked to higher risks of alcohol-related problems in young

Rhett Emery



Rhett, a Manager at the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners, is a former secondary school teacher who lives in Raumati Beach. His 17-year-old daughter is in year 13 at Kapiti College.

Rhett doesn't really think kids are drinking any younger now than they used to, but he does think the situation has changed.

"What kids are drinking today is a lot different to what we were drinking at their age. Beer was 4 percent alcohol, and you got bloated if you drank too much. Now, a lot of what the kids are drinking is spirit-based and around 8 percent. It's twice the strength and much easier to drink.

"When we were young, parties finished at midnight and you went home to bed. Now kids just seem go out after parties and drink into the early hours. Why do bars need to be open at 3 or 4am?"

He thinks there's also been a real shift in attitudes to kids drinking and drunkenness,

even amongst adults.

"At one Kapiti College ball a couple years back, a take-home memento given to the kids was a shot glass with the school logo on it. What sort of message does that send?"

Rhett says his daughter drinks but doesn't have a problem with alcohol and neither do the kids of his friends because they have been taught to drink sensibly in the home.

"It's about having open conversations with them from an early age. Good parenting starts when kids are very young. You can't expect to suddenly be able to teach your kids good things if you haven't done so all along."

Rhett would far rather see kids go to a supervised after-ball party than be left to their own devices.

"You can't take alcohol away from kids now; it's too late for that, so the best you can do is impart strategies to them to drink sensibly, to say no when someone encourages them to be stupid with alcohol."

He says changes to social supply laws would give parents a little more support. Parents could argue that they can't supply alcohol at parties because it's against the law.

"But at the end of the day, you don't need legislation to be a good parent."

But for many, this will only be one more cause for worry. Parents like Anna Kenna will tell you that encouraging your children not to drink is an uphill battle when alcohol is associated with sophistication and joy everywhere young people look. For 20 years, New Zealand has enjoyed some of the most liberal liquor laws in the world, and the moderation horse has long since bolted.

And if we have a significant number of parents who aren't concerned about their kids' drinking, or don't yet understand that they should be – and it appears we do – then strengthening social supply laws will do little on its own.

But as Cate Brett says, while the law can't stop people drinking harmfully by itself, it can help wake society up to the risks associated with alcohol, particularly for adolescents.

The Law Commission has warned each of its recommendations must be taken seriously for they will only be truly effective if implemented as a whole.

Its four recommendations around social supply may help curb some of the harms around youth drinking. Its hope is that the remaining 148 will help the rest of society take a long hard look at itself as well – and perhaps make a start on getting the genie back into the bottle. ■

Rob Zorn is a Wellington-based writer.

adulthood, even when at low-risk levels.

"Of most concern," she says, "is that the brain is likely to be more sensitive to damage from alcohol in childhood and adolescence as it is still developing – leading to learning difficulties, memory problems and reduced attention spans."

For Jaggard, there is an upside to these findings.

"This body of research now supports parents and other adults who don't want to encourage under-age drinking and gives them concrete reasons to deny their children alcohol."

Youth are part of the solution

The Law Commission's report *Alcohol in Our Lives: Curbing the Harm* makes 153 recommendations spanning a broad range of areas. However, none has featured in the news more prominently than the recommendation to raise the drinking age. **Sarah Helm** explains why discussion and debate about youth drinking is a good thing.

Sarah Helm



AT ALAC'S Working Together Conference in May, Sir Geoffrey Palmer said the law couldn't fix everything, but it could help nudge New Zealand towards a more moderate drinking culture. The rest is up to us.

We shouldn't be surprised that the age at which young people can purchase alcohol is one aspect of our drinking culture that has dominated media discussion.

Firstly, some high-profile tragedies involving young people and alcohol have shaken the nation and forced us all – adults and youth – to take stock. After the tragic King's College incident, we were left collectively reeling. Many of us who work in the sector have been inundated with calls from concerned parents and teachers wanting to prevent something similar happening to their teenagers.

Another reason why the drinking age

dominates discussion about law change is that, as adults, it gives us an out – i.e. it's all a youth problem. Yet whenever something impacts on children and young people, adults should probably take a look in the mirror first. Young people and children live in the

👉 **Was this the dream we had when we passed our current alcohol laws?** 👉

environment we have collectively developed for them and over which they have very little say. Was this the dream we had when we passed our current alcohol laws? If we believe that alcohol is doing so much damage to ourselves and the lives of our children, then as a



nation, as communities or as families, we are responsible for making change.

There is some truth behind the common assumption that the drinking problem is a youth problem. Young people suffer disproportionately high levels of harm from alcohol, particularly in the group aged 18–24 years. This harm is significant and causes scars that last for young people: violence, sexual violence, suicides, road crashes, injuries, and the list goes on. This generation, like none before it, has experienced the most deregulated alcohol environment and exposure to high levels of advertising and alcohol access. If the far-reaching proposals suggested by the Law Commission were adopted, there would be a safer environment that supports a more moderate drinking culture – not just for young people, but for all of us.

Youth are also a vital part of the

“ **This generation, like none before it, has experienced the most deregulated alcohol environment and exposure to high levels of advertising.** ”

equation in transforming our society. At ALAC, we believe young people are positive agents of change who can help reduce the harms of alcohol for themselves and their communities. Young people want and need a healthy family and neighbourhood to grow up in. Their whole lives depend on it so they have an investment in helping to be a part of the solution.

Young people are also great at asking questions and are less afraid of doing things differently, which is exactly what

we need right now. It was young people's candid statements to the Law Commission that helped convince Sir Geoffrey that it was time to change the law.

From 22–30 May, there were over 200 events held nationally for Youth Week. More than 50 events and activities addressed alcohol harm. Young people led or helped lead most of these projects (see a profile of these projects in our feature ‘Youth leadership on alcohol’, page 19). This leadership has helped grow ALAC's faith that the youth of today can help us become a healthier nation. ■

Sarah Helm is ALAC's Youth Action Plan National Manager.

To comment on this and other opinion pieces, log in to www.drugfoundation.org.nz.

Campus crackdown

It once marketed itself as the party university, but now the University of Otago's academic reputation is under threat internationally because of the binge-drinking and bacchanalian revelry of its students. The university is trying to reverse its drinking culture, but how much can it achieve when, across society, drinking to excess has become the norm for the young?

ALCOHOL ABUSE by students has been an ongoing problem for the University of Otago. In the past few years, the media has had a field day reporting instances of drunken riots and out-of-control street parties all involving inebriated students. Activities such as the 'Undie 500', where students drive a convoy of decorated vehicles from Christchurch to Otago, and the annual toga parade, where first-year students

make togas from bed sheets and parade through the main streets of Dunedin, are guaranteed to make headlines for all the wrong reasons.

The future of the 'Undie 500' is in doubt after the last four ended in riots, street fires and numerous arrests. There have also been calls from Dunedin residents for the toga parade to be cancelled after the 2009 event involving over 2,000 students left chaos in the

main streets, with smashed windows and walls covered in blood, vomit and faeces.

However, the University of Otago is determined not to let the irresponsible actions of some of its students tarnish its academic record. While the public and the media are only just starting to see changes, alcohol abuse has been at the forefront of the university's agenda for the last decade, culminating in a



number of policies that Vice-Chancellor Professor David Skegg says will help address the “grim and chronic national problem” of binge-drinking.

In October last year, the University Council agreed to ban alcohol advertising and sponsorship on all campuses and at all events after orientation celebrations turned disorderly. Director of Student Services David Richardson said the advertising ban was a “high-level statement” intended to visibly articulate the university’s position against binge-drinking and alcohol abuse.

Another way the university tries to battle binge-drinking is by offering students the assistance of trained nurses, counsellors and psychologists who provide advice on all aspects of student life. In the past few years, an emphasis

“Because alcohol is advertised so cheaply and often specifically targeted at students, many are coming to the university already acclimatised to believe binge-drinking is a social norm.”

David Richardson

has been placed on alcohol-related issues to better equip these health professionals to combat alcohol abuse.

A recent change that came under scrutiny from OUSA (the Otago University Student Association) was the 2007 implementation of the Student Code of Conduct. All students are expected to comply with these rules and regulations, and the university uses them to monitor and punish ‘anti-social’ behaviour both on and off campus. While the legality of the university’s jurisdiction is still being debated, the results point in favour of the code. David Richardson says that, while it’s still too early for tangible results, “fewer riots and street fires point in the right direction”.

With the Code of Conduct came the

appointment of Campus Watch, a 24/7 service where trained people monitor all student activities, both on and off campus, offering advice and counselling, but also reporting any breaches of the code to the university.

The university has also been researching the problems of alcohol abuse and binge-drinking and pin-points the source of the problem as the Sale of Liquor Act 1989. In an attempt to make New Zealand a more desirable location for overseas tourists, the Act and subsequent amendments completely opened up the rules and regulations surrounding the sale and purchase of alcohol. This has meant licences are more easily given to sell cheaper alcohol to younger customers.

At the time, Richardson was a high school principal and well aware of the implications these changes would have on the way young New Zealanders drink.

“What we are seeing now is the result of a drinking social culture that begins in the mid-teens. Because alcohol is advertised so cheaply and often specifically targeted at students, many are coming to the university already acclimatised to believe binge-drinking is a social norm.”

The media and some members of the New Zealand public may point their fingers at the University of Otago demanding that either students start behaving or that the university deals with them swiftly, but Professor Skegg urges critics to see the bigger picture.

A recent study of student drinking habits conducted at five universities throughout the country found a distinct trend towards heavy drinking. Eighty-one percent of students reported having consumed alcohol in the preceding four weeks, while 37 percent said they’d had one or more binge-drinking sessions in the preceding week.

“These facts about the wider environment need to be acknowledged by critics who demand that the University of Otago should instantly solve its student behaviour problems, which cannot be solved until the culture of binge-drinking among New Zealand youth is radically altered,” Professor Skegg says. ■

Quotes of Substance

“It’s not going to bite you.”

Mohi Waihi, a 64-year-old former smoker, brought his old heart to the Maori Affairs Select Committee hearing as part of an inquiry into the tobacco industry. He had a heart transplant in 2005 after suffering five heart attacks brought on by heart disease.

“Personally, I thought [the Law Commission’s suggestions] were all soundly based recommendations, but you sort of wonder, ‘What’s the point?’ Is anyone actually going to take any notice?”

Chief Coroner **Neil MacLean** comments on the latest statistics from the Coroner’s Office showing that alcohol deaths have skyrocketed in the last decade – including 12 youths who had drunk themselves to death since July 2007.

“President Obama’s newly released drug war budget is essentially the same as Bush’s, with roughly twice as much money going to the criminal justice system as to treatment and prevention – this despite Obama’s statements on the campaign trail that drug use should be treated as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue.”

Bill Piper, Director of non-profit organisation Drug Policy Alliance, compares President Obama’s talk with his walk.

“Legislation doesn’t usually happen until someone dies, which is what happened with fantasy.”

Jennifer Sibley, Senior Forensic Scientist at the Institute of Environmental Science and Research, says sellers of synthetic cannabis should have to prove it is safe before they can sell it.

continued on page 21 ►



Experience. Insight. Hope.

The Drug Foundation has launched two websites featuring the personal stories of people in recovery from drug addiction. Each person's circumstances may differ, but they have in common the desire for change in their own lives.

EARLY IN 2010, 20 New Zealanders were interviewed about their past use and abuse of drugs and what it took for them to be able to move on. Everyone agreed to share their insights in the hope they could help others struggling with addiction.

The new DrugHelp and MethHelp websites include extensive use of video, quotes and first-person narrative, alongside practical advice and tools for change.

By sharing insights gained through the raw, unglamorous experiences of real people, visitors concerned about

their own or another's drug use are shown change is possible and how to begin.

The websites came into being after research released in 2009 by the Ministry of Health highlighted gaps in information available to support the National Drug Policy's drug demand reduction focus. Particularly lacking were reliable and accurate information about drugs and drug harms along with tools to address drug use concerns. This led the Ministry to contract a consortium led by the NZ Drug Foundation to produce new information resources.

Funding for the project extends beyond the creation of the websites. Over the next two years, the Drug Foundation will work with others in the AOD sector to coordinate production of drug information resources and promote these to the public. Already being discussed is an online ordering facility for hard copy resources.

Creating the websites, a natural step for the Drug Foundation, is being supported by an advisory group whose membership includes representatives from CAYADs, ALAC, CADS Auckland, Alcohol Drug Helpline, the National



HELP

Help someone else

Committee for Addiction Treatment, Matua Raki and the Ministry of Health. Ensuring information and help resources are of high quality is a key part of their role.

So as to not rely solely on people logging on, a workbook and DVD to complement the MethHelp website have been produced. It shows people where to get help and provides simple strategies for change. This resource was funded through the government's Action Plan on Methamphetamine and is available from the Alcohol Drug Helpline or from the Drug Foundation.

After six intensive months of development, the Drug Foundation is keen to hear from visitors about the website. Feedback from real people wanting to change their lives will be used to enhance what is already offered.

Promote DrugHelp/MethHelp

You can help the Drug Foundation with these new websites:

- Talk to people about what you see and think.
- Spread the word – email people you know, pass on a flyer or wallet card, put up a poster, add a link to

your website. Order promotional materials from: info@drughelp.org.nz.

- Tell us what you think – use the websites' online feedback forms or contact the New Zealand Drug Foundation office.

DRUGHELP.ORG.NZ

METHHELP.ORG.NZ



Worse than cure

Project Prevention, an American sterilisation programme that pays problematic drug users either to be sterilised or to accept long-term contraception, is coming to the United Kingdom. **Niamh Eastwood** argues that, far from alleviating suffering and protecting women and children, the controversial programme is a fundamental attack on the rights of the most vulnerable.

Niamh
Eastwood



PROJECT PREVENTION was established in 1998 by Barbara Harris, an American with four adopted children she calls her “crack babies”. Harris describes her work as “humanitarian”, but it is unclear what is all that humanitarian about targeting some of the most defenceless, desperate and disenfranchised people in society.

Project Prevention was not Harris’s first attempt to control the reproductive rights of women. In the past, she has lobbied the California State legislature to criminalise women who use illicit drugs while pregnant.

Thankfully, a draft Bill to this effect never became law. If it had, women with drug problems who became pregnant would have become a hidden population afraid to access prenatal services or drug treatment centres. Harris continuously talks about “the rights of the children”, but such an approach would have clearly put both mother and child at risk.

Harris says she wanted legislation to make long-term contraception

mandatory for women who had children that were substance-exposed in the womb. Since the State would not take action, she decided to do so herself and set up Project Prevention.

Initially called Children Requiring a Caring Community, or CRACK, the programme pays problematic drug users either \$200 to agree to long-term contraception or \$300 to be sterilised. Harris’s aim is to stop drug users having children, and it is clear that, as a group, she has deemed them unfit parents.

By encouraging sterilisation, Project Prevention is taking away reproductive rights for women at a point when they are not able to make a clear decision about such an important issue. Harris’s retort is that, if they are not able to make an informed decision about their health, they are not able to look after a child. However, it is not that simple. As a society, we must protect the fundamental human rights of every person, including their sexual and

reproductive rights.

Project Prevention also targets specific groups within society. Firstly, women make up the vast majority of 'clients' – since its inception, 3,432 people have been paid, and 3,381 of these have been women. More than a third have been sterilised.

Secondly, and most obviously, the programme targets poor women – very few of us would agree to limit or potentially end our ability to have children for a few hundred bucks.

Thirdly, Project Prevention appears to target African Americans and other ethnic minority groups. Harris denies this, saying she herself is married to a black man and has adopted four black children, but this does not detract from the fact that more than half those paid by Project Prevention are either African American, Hispanic or from another ethnic background. This is despite the fact that non-whites make up 25 percent of the US population and that drug use amongst all groups is comparable.

Lynn Paltrow, Executive Director of the National Advocates for Pregnant Women, has advocated against Project Prevention in the US. She has thoroughly researched the organisation and writes specifically about how Harris targets those who access the project. Paltrow

“By encouraging sterilisation, Project Prevention is taking away reproductive rights for women at a point when they are not able to make a clear decision about such an important issue.”

says Project Prevention in California has placed large billboards in Black and Latino communities in Los Angeles. Flyers are handed out containing statements such as, “Don’t let a baby ruin you drug habit”.

This counters Harris’s contention that Project Prevention does not seek out ‘clients’. In reality, it is clear that the

programme actively and aggressively tries to attract women to its service. This was borne out in the UK in June when Harris and others actively lobbied women outside a surgery in Glasgow. That the project targets poor people is also demonstrated by the fact it advertises at bus stops, welfare agencies, soup kitchens, areas of high prostitution, methadone clinics and probation offices.

Harris’s view on women who use drugs is deeply offensive. She makes statements such as: “I’m not saying these women are dogs, but they’re not acting any more responsible than a dog in heat” and “We don’t allow dogs to breed. We spay them. We neuter them. We try to keep them from having unwanted puppies, and yet these women are literally having litters of children.” Her colleagues have described the children of drug ‘addicts’ as “pre-doomed” – failing to consider the stigma and damage caused by such labelling.

In April 2010, Harris announced Project Prevention was coming to the UK. Release was shocked and appalled. We vehemently oppose the idea that vulnerable and desperate people – people with serious health problems – could be coerced into making long-term decisions about their reproductive choices. It is reprehensible that someone’s fertility is thought to be for sale because they are deemed an unfit parent.

Release has been at the forefront of challenging Project Prevention and is working with other organisations and medical authorities to stop Project Prevention in the UK. We have been active in the media and have brought the issue to the attention of the British Medical Association (BMA).

When Harris has been interviewed by the British media, her responses have been bluntly simple. When asked about the fact that the money would be used for drugs or would only benefit drug dealers, she answers that she does not care. When questioned about the funding she receives in the US (which comes from sources considered to be right wing), she says she does not care where the money comes from. When challenged about the ethical nature of



Martin Hunter/Guardian News & Media Ltd 2010

“We don’t allow dogs to breed. We spay them. We neuter them. We try to keep them from having unwanted puppies, and yet these women are literally having litters of children.”

Barbara Harris

🔥🔥 **Project Prevention has placed large billboards in Black and Latino communities. Flyers are handed out containing statements such as, 'Don't let a baby ruin your drug habit'. 🔥🔥**

the programme, she answers in a number of different ways ranging from, “What about the rights of the children?” to attacking the right of anyone to oppose her views unless they have adopted a child addicted to crack.

When I was interviewed with her on Al Jazeera, she responded to my point about the fundamental right to have control over your own sexual and reproductive choices by saying, “Well, she goes on about the rights of the mother, but what about the rights of the child?”. She also claims the women who had accessed Project Prevention in the US had already been pregnant several times before. All of the examples she provided were women who had “22, 23 or even 24” pregnancies prior to being sterilised, but statistics from the US show that women who have drug problems only become pregnant at a rate slightly higher than the national average. Harris uses simple, anecdotal and provocative stories to justify what she is doing because this is the only way she can get support.

The problem with Project Prevention and Barbara Harris’s viewpoint is that it fails to consider a number of important factors.

Firstly, she asks, “What about the rights of the child?” but her approach results in no children. They are essentially hypothetical children, and for those who are born into families where there is drug addiction, their value and potential are undermined.

Secondly, she completely fails to understand that by ‘incentivising’ vulnerable people into making choices about their reproductive rights, we are effectively coercing them into making a decision that may not be in their best interests.

Thirdly, for many women using drugs, their children or becoming pregnant are the catalyst for change.

Fourthly, it fails to consider the public health messaging around safe sex and that there are better alternatives – more money for drug treatment and family-focused interventions, better housing and education, recognition that this is a complex social and economic issue.

Finally and probably most importantly,

it smacks of eugenics. If we allow drug users to be subjected to such interventions, who is next – people with mental health problems, those who are obese, maybe those who simply cannot afford children? Many involved in this debate, both for and against, have said calling Project Prevention a form of eugenics may be over stating, but Harris’s recent interview in *The Guardian* may lead to some reconsider.

Her next project, she says, will be in Haiti. “We’re going to offer Depo [contraceptive] injections every three months to women in exchange for food cards. The women in Haiti are having children they can’t even feed, so why are they getting pregnant? Just think about how much suffering that’s going to prevent.”

...Then she begins talking about women in Africa who have AIDS. “My thinking is, why are they having these babies? I’m sorry – tell me that you don’t agree! If you know you have AIDS, why are you getting pregnant and having babies that you know are going to have AIDS? Babies are suffering. It’s preventable.”

In September 2010, the BMA Ethics Committee is meeting to consider the activities of Project Prevention, as GPs would be required to be part of the process. Harris has already announced they will not be offering sterilisation in the UK because of its medical system here but that it is her intention to offer long-term contraception.

Release will be submitting its view to the BMA Ethics Committee that this is still unethical – no decision around healthcare should involve coercion through bribery. We are not allowed to sell our organs or even receive payments for donor sperm. It is also without doubt that, as a society, we should not allow vulnerable and disenfranchised people to be paid to make decisions about their reproductive choices. ■

Niamh Eastwood is Head of Legal Services and Deputy Director of Release, UK’s national centre of expertise on drugs and drugs law.
www.release.org.uk

To comment on this and other guest editorials, log in to www.drugfoundation.org.nz.

Youth leadership on alcohol



In recent months, alcohol and young people have featured prominently in the news. There have been a number of liquor-related deaths and injuries, controversies over after-ball parties and much debate about drinking and purchasing ages.

BUT WHAT hasn't made the news is the significant number of young people around the country who have become active in their communities, working towards change and greater awareness about excessive drinking.

During Youth Week (22–30 May), more than 50 activities took place around New Zealand addressing alcohol harm. Young people of all ages participated in these activities, with many taking on leadership roles. They were sponsored by ALAC and coordinated by New Zealand Aotearoa Adolescent Health and Development (NZAAHD).

Here are profiles of just a few.

Tairawhiti youth masquerade ball

Youth worker Jimi Hills organised an official masquerade school ball in Ruatoria for students from all over the Central East Coast. He spent more than 12 months putting it together, but reckons it was a great success.

“Young people here don't really get much formal stuff like this, so the idea was to bring the party to the rural kids. We had a swanky four-course meal with a band and a DJ. But it was more than just an evening of fine dining. There was some fine information, too.

“We had a performance from ‘2.0’, one of New Zealand's best and youngest hip-hop groups, who then spoke to us about their personal experience as young performers when it came to drugs and alcohol. It was good for the kids to hear from role models who were not much older than themselves.

“After the dinner, a number of guests spoke to the kids about their personal experience growing up in New Zealand and about alcohol. We had Monty Soutar, who served in New Zealand's 28th Māori Battalion during World War II, and Rua Tipoki, who used to play rugby for the Canterbury Crusaders and the New Zealand Māori.

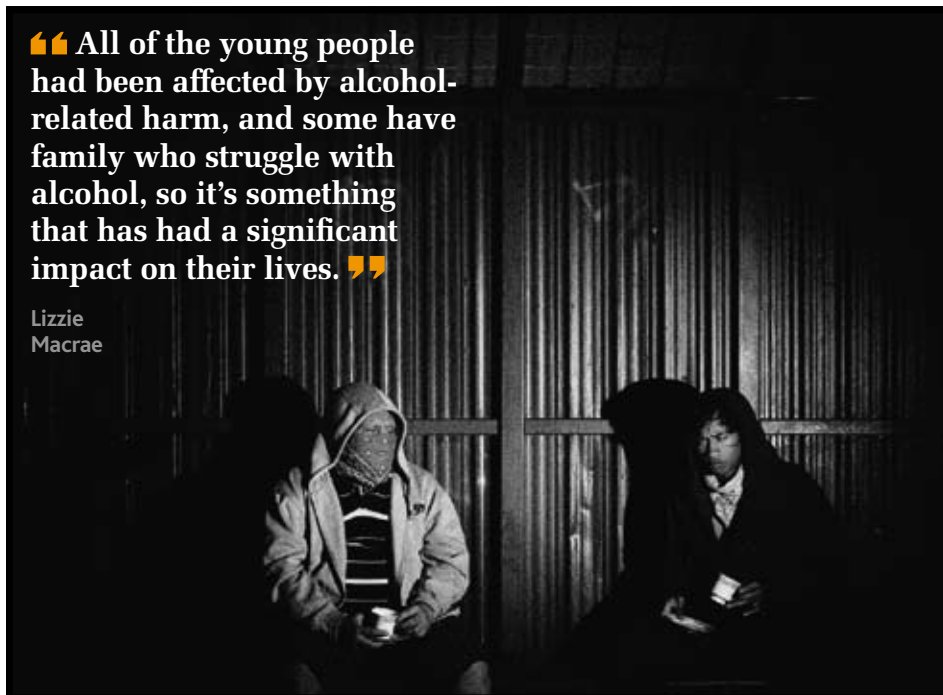
“We had more than 200 kids come,

“You always read negative stuff in the papers about our teenagers, so it was really nice to finally hear some positive things being said.”

Rina
Hudson

“All of the young people had been affected by alcohol-related harm, and some have family who struggle with alcohol, so it's something that has had a significant impact on their lives.”

Lizzie
Macrae



and they all stayed the night, so the next day we put on a breakfast for everyone. We ran a few workshops on health and youth attitudes and heard from other speakers about methamphetamine, addiction and gang culture.

“It was all about giving these kids a chance. They were inspired by some pretty important and influential people. Some of them were a bit surprised because they turned up expecting a dance, but they all had a pretty good time.”

Northland youth health expo

Rina Hudson is a Whangarei careers consultant with a passion for guiding young people to success within their communities. During Youth Week, she facilitated a mini expo where public health and social services professionals spoke to youth and members of the community about education, health and social support services available in Whangarei.

“The purpose of the expo was to get older and younger people communicating on these important issues. It was an opportunity for the young people to hear about the harm alcohol can do to individuals, to families and to our entire community.

“The motivation behind the expo was the losses caused by alcohol, including loss of lives through alcohol-related diseases and car accidents, but also the repercussions on our community and whānau of alcohol-related crime and violence.

“About 35 young people from the community organised the whole event. They were handing out flyers weeks before and spent ages advertising the expo. They provided the morning and afternoon tea, coordinated the speakers, acted as MCs and even helped people in the car park!

“You always read negative stuff in the papers about our teenagers, so it was really nice to finally hear some positive things being said.

“They all really enjoyed organising and coordinating everything, so they're planning to continue by holding some after-school health workshops. But I think their next plan is to have a disco. Watch this space!”

Tauranga photography workshop

Lizzie Macrae, a Community Youth Worker at the Merivale Community Centre in Tauranga, organised a photography workshop for young people in the area.

“Every night over Youth Week, we got a professional photographer to come and teach the youth the basics of photography and about lighting and angles. We only had about six kids, but they were all really keen to learn.

“After the lessons, we sent the students out into the community and told them to use their new skills to create photos that were related to alcohol and the harm it does to families and the community.

“We are just a small community; we only have one set of shops and one place that sells liquor, but, unfortunately, there are lots of people in our community that use alcohol for self-medication.

“All of the young people had been affected by alcohol-related harm, and some have family who struggle with alcohol, so it's something that has had a significant impact on their lives and something that we really wanted to address.

“They took some great photos. They all symbolised the problems people and communities face when alcohol is abused. There were photos of money falling from a bottle down a drain, a family seated around a table with

“It’s not just a family issue anymore; it’s to do with our whole community.”

Rhonda Hoffman

“It was all about giving these kids a chance. They were inspired by some pretty important and influential people.”

Jimi Hills

nothing but bottles on their plates and a glass bottle gradually smashing as it got emptier.

“The photos are all exhibited at our community centre so the community can see and experience the great work of our young people.”

Coming together in Invercargill

Rhonda Hoffman, a Child Advocate for children affected by family violence, wanted to organise an event that would allow both young and old to share their thoughts and experiences regarding alcohol.

“We ran a discussion group at our local marae. The event was called Whānau Ora – Coming Together – Connecting Youth and Family. The idea was to get young people talking about their opinions and experiences with alcohol, and about 25 people from the community came, as well as people from Barnados, Family Violence focus groups, the Southern District Health Board, Adventure Development and the YMCA.

“We started by presenting scenarios to do with alcohol, and people ranked them either low, medium or high, depending on the amount of risk they felt in each situation. For example, in one scenario, we asked how people

would feel if someone they didn’t know was pouring and mixing their drinks. The discussions really showed how different attitudes can be between younger and older people.

“We then started four main areas of discussion led by Adventure Development. The first was advice for the adults given by the youth, who asked that their parents communicate better instead of hassling them when it came to alcohol. They felt this would promote honesty.

“Then the adults gave advice to the youth. They also asked for better communication and honesty but also for the youth to take responsibility for their actions and to question themselves as to the motivation behind their drinking.

“We moved on to discussing the self-harm that drinking does and also the harm to others. Nearly everyone present had a friend or family member who had been injured or killed in an alcohol-related incident.

“Lastly, we talked about our responsibility as a community to take action against alcohol misuse. It’s not just a family issue anymore; it’s to do with our whole community.”

Quotes of Substance

“Looking back now, it’s something silly that happened that night. I’m glad it’s dealt with.”

Outside court, Sione Laukai expressed remorse for his “silly” assault on a man he thought had stolen his beer.

“Afghan drug traffic is like a tsunami constantly breaking over Russia – we are sinking in it.”

Victor Ivanov, Director of Russia’s Federal Service for the Control of Narcotics, accuses NATO of turning a blind eye to Afghanistan’s opium production over worries about driving poppy farmers into the arms of the Taliban.

“Current policy is not having an effect of reducing drug use... but it’s costing the public a fortune.”

Harvard University Economist Jeffrey Miron says the only sure thing taxpayers get for more spending on Police and soldiers is more homicides.

“For every drug dealer you put in jail or kill, there’s a line-up to replace him because the money is just so good.”

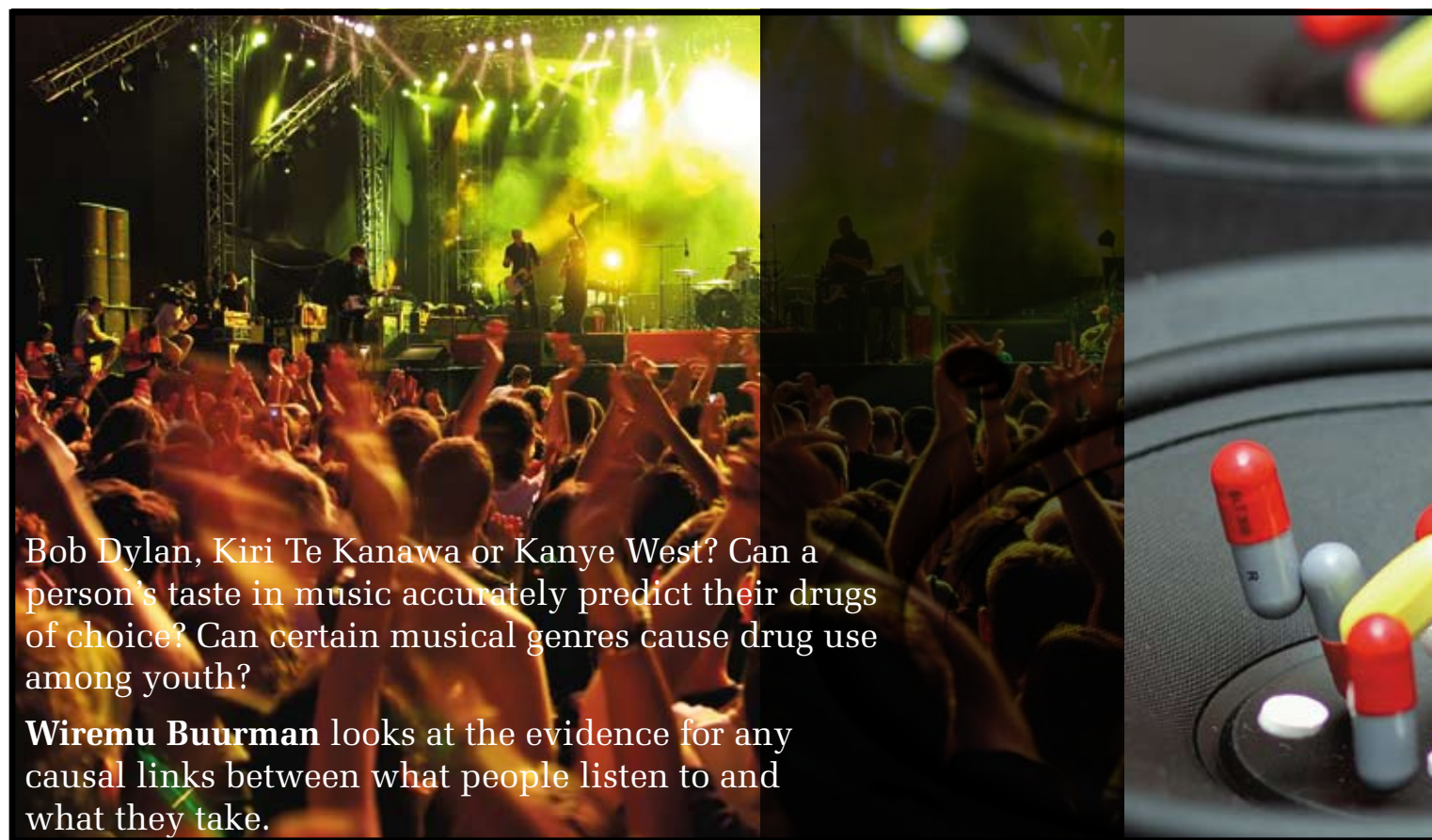
Walter McCay, the head of the non-profit Centre for Professional Police Certification in Mexico City, provides an eye witness perspective of the situation unfolding in Mexico.

“This ‘party central’ thing is a load of rubbish. It’s being promoted as an almighty piss-up, and that is not our intention.”

Rugby New Zealand 2011 CEO Martin Snedden expresses his frustration with the Queen’s Wharf debacle and says ‘fan zones’ around the country will have only limited space for alcohol.

continued on page 25

When drugs and music overlap



Bob Dylan, Kiri Te Kanawa or Kanye West? Can a person's taste in music accurately predict their drugs of choice? Can certain musical genres cause drug use among youth?

Wiremu Buurman looks at the evidence for any causal links between what people listen to and what they take.

ELECTRONIC MUSIC fans just love ecstasy while reggae fans are all potheads. Rock fans are big binge-drinkers, but hip-hop fans do all drugs. People who listen to classical music occasionally have a wine with dinner.

According to Adrian North, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Leicester, these may not just be stereotypes. Certain correlations can be drawn between musical tastes and drug preferences – but the results are not as obvious as you might expect. For instance, his survey of 2,500 participants

found that opera lovers were as likely as other music lovers to try hallucinogenic drugs, and that one out of every four classical listeners had tried marijuana.

Another study, conducted by Meng-Jinn Chen, a Research Scientist at the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, California, supports the stereotype about hip-hop fans and their drug use. His survey of more than 1,000 college students found, “Young people who listen to rap and hip-hop music are more likely to have problems with alcohol, drugs and violence than

listeners of other types of music.”

Rap music was also consistently associated with alcohol use, potential alcohol use disorder, illicit drug use and aggressive behaviour.

But is rap's bad rap fair? After all, blaming entire genres of music for society's woes is nothing new. When rock and roll first arrived on the scene, it was accused of destroying morals and inciting criminal behaviour. Since that time, it has been accused of just about everything else.

While Chen admits his findings

don't prove that listening to rap music has caused increased drug use among American youth, he says his study shows young people may be influenced by frequent exposure to lyrics that make positive references to substance use and violence.

Chen's findings are given further context by research conducted at Berkeley by Denise Herd, who assessed the lyrics of 341 of rap music's most popular hits between 1979 and 1997

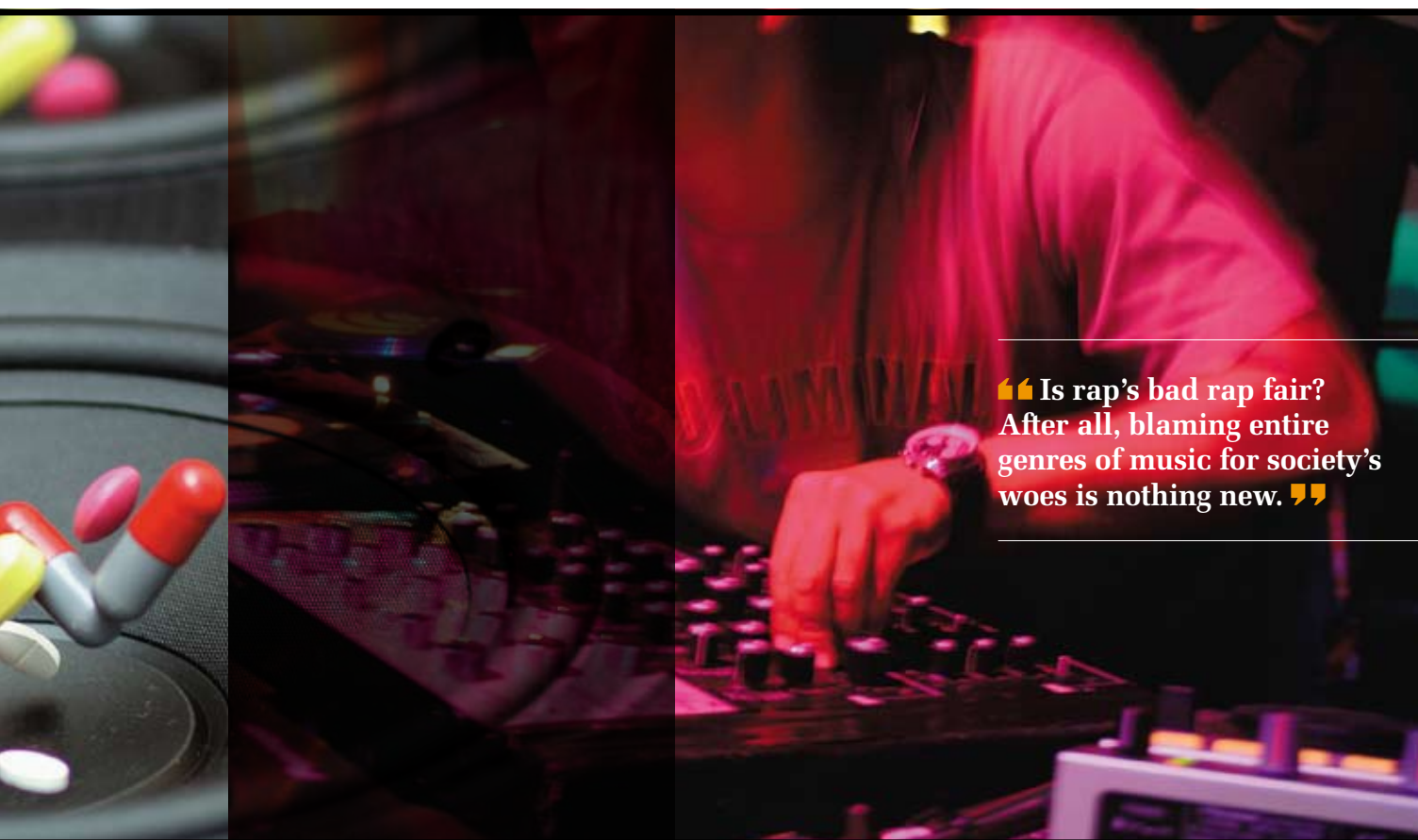
So what caused the increased focus on drugs in rap music during this time period?

It would be hard to account for this trend without considering the impact of the crack epidemic – the tidal wave of crack cocaine from Latin America that swept through the poorer neighbourhoods of the largest US cities throughout the 1980s.

The environment in which many rap artists were living was impacted dramatically, and this was reflected

themed 1988 release *Straight Outta Compton* – without requiring radio airplay – it became evident to both record companies and aspiring artists that sex, drugs and violence sell just as well in music as they do in movies.

Chen argues that, just as alcohol product placement in movies is big business, so too is it becoming big business in the music industry and says people should be concerned about rap and hip-hop being used to market



“Is rap's bad rap fair? After all, blaming entire genres of music for society's woes is nothing new.”

and found that references to drugs had increased six-fold over that period.

Herd's report also found that, “Of the 38 most popular songs between 1979 and 1984, only four contained drug references. But by the late 1980s, the incidence had increased to 19 percent, and after 1993, nearly 70 percent of rap songs mentioned drug use.”

Herd also noted that lyrics describing drug use had not only become more recurrent, but “...the context changed from concern about the devastation of drugs to a more positive portrayal”.

in their lyrics:

“If I wasn't in the rap game,
I'd probably have a key knee deep
in the crack game
Because the streets is a short stop,
Either you're slingin' crack rock or
you got a wicked jump shot.”
Notorious B.I.G. – Things Done Changed (1994)

Another important ingredient leading to drug themes becoming such a hip-hop mainstay has probably been money. When NWA went double platinum with their violent, misogynistic and drug-

alcoholic beverages.

Busta Rhymes's hit song *Pass the Courvoisier* is a good example. According to MTV Reporter Gil Kaufman, it helped Courvoisier's parent company Allied Domecq attain a double digit surge in US sales. Domecq later did a promotion deal with Busta's supervising company Violator. ■

Wiremu Buurman is the Drug Foundation's Communications Adviser.

For references used in this article, visit www.drugfoundation.org.nz.



Breath-testing for school rugby fans



NZPA

CHRIST'S COLLEGE and Christchurch Boys' High School have played an annual rugby match for more than a century, but the much-anticipated event has been spoiled in recent years by alcohol-fuelled violence. This year, an estimated 3,000 non-student rugby spectators were forced to line up at the gates to be breath-tested for alcohol in a bid to curb the violence that spoiled last year's match. Eight officers conducted the tests at the gate, and a further 17 officers patrolled the grounds.

Christchurch Police Area Commander Inspector Derek Erasmus said this year's outcome (no arrests and only seven spectators turned away at the gates) was a great improvement on the previous year, in which 250 people were involved in a brawl following the match.

Alcohol death toll skyrocketing

ACCORDING TO recent Coroner's Office statistics, alcohol death rates have skyrocketed over the last 10 years. Experts suggest the cause is the culture of binge-drinking ingrained in New Zealand's youth.

Coroners say alcohol has featured in the deaths of 1,100 New Zealanders during this time period. Deaths linked to alcohol rose from 41 in 2000 to 254 in 2008.

"The trend we have noticed, particularly with young people, is that they are dying at astonishingly young ages by basically drinking themselves to death," said Chief Coroner Neil MacLean.

Otago University Professor Dr Doug Sellman said the Coroner's Office statistics tend to focus on deadly alcohol poisoning and exclude those deaths that are the result of accidents and diseases caused by excessive drinking. When these are factored in, the alcohol death toll jumps to about 1,000 deaths per year.

Other recently released figures from the Coroner's Office show that, since July 2007, 83 New Zealanders had drunk themselves to death – including 12 teenagers.

Police attempt to ban pot mags



AN OFFICIAL Information Act request by marijuana law reform group NORML has revealed Police asked the Department of Internal Affairs to ban three marijuana-themed magazines: *Norml News*, *High Times* and *Cannabis Culture*.

Three issues of *Norml News* were referred to the Censor's Office following raids on Switched on Gardener stores across the country. Up until this point, the Police had denied being involved with sending the publication to the censors.

The Censor's Office deemed that only three issues of *Norml*

News should be classified as R18, reasoning that: "*Norml News* is produced for mature readers with a specific interest in cannabis culture and cannabis law reform issues... It has social and political merit as a forum for these views... These three issues cannot fairly be said to promote or encourage criminal activity to an extent that their availability to New Zealand adults is likely to be injurious."

Labour MP Charles Chauvel appointed to new HIV commission

LABOUR MP Charles Chauvel has been appointed as a representative to the United Nations Global Commission on HIV and the Law.

The group will focus on global HIV-linked human rights and legal issues and aims to find out how laws and law enforcement can support, rather than block, effective HIV responses.

Mr Chauvel said New Zealand has reacted to the HIV issue well, but there are still significant problems in the third world.

Synthetic cannabis untested

SYNTHESISED CANNABIS products are being sold legally in New Zealand but have not been tested for safety pre-sale.

The range of products, which have similar effects to cannabis, are being sold at outlets such as Cosmic Corner and Auckland's Hemp Store, as well as on the internet. The products carry names such as Puff, Thai High, Kronik, Dream, Space and Aroma. While many are marketed as incense, the fine print says the product is to be smoked. Drug Foundation

Executive Director Ross Bell said the products were being sold with "no controls whatsoever" and the law needed to be fixed to ensure retailers can prove their safety before sale.

Synthetic cannabis products have already been banned in seven countries – including France, Britain and Germany.

Smokefree prisons by 2011



NZPA

CORRECTIONS MINISTER

Judith Collins has announced a 12-month plan to make all prisons smokefree by July next year.

According to *New Zealand Herald* political commentator John Armstrong, the impetus for the new law has less to do with prisoners' health than with the government protecting itself from threat of legal action from prison guards exposed to prisoners' second-hand smoke.

Some prisoners have warned that the Corrections Department would have trouble enforcing such a rule. One recently released former inmate of Rimutaka Prison said most prisoners smoked.

"There will be a bit of a ruckus going on if they take the prisoners' smokes away. People won't want to quit. I can see a lot of stand-overs. The prison guards who still smoke, they better watch out because some of the inmates might react."

The New Zealand Medical Association welcomed the

decision – “This will have a positive effect on the health of prison staff and prisoners,” said Dr Paul Ockelford – but said that a comprehensive smoking cessation programme to assist those in prison to quit smoking, including the provision of nicotine replacement therapy, will be essential.

\$28,000 charge for condom removal

A VIETNAMESE student who flew to New Zealand after swallowing a condom containing heroin has been asked by Christchurch Hospital to cough up \$28,000 to cover the cost of the operation needed to remove it.

But his lawyer says that there is no chance of Tri Phan or his family paying, as he is broke, and his mother is too sick and poor to help pay either. On a reasonable wage in Vietnam, it would still take about three years for someone to earn this amount of money.

Phan, 26, was jailed for six months on the charge of importing 0.3g of heroin into New Zealand.

Naki sting labelled entrapment

A NEW Plymouth lawyer is accusing Police of manipulating well meaning people into committing crimes and then arresting them.

Paul Keegan has highlighted Police transcripts of a conversation between an undercover cop and a shop assistant at Guru Gardener. The transcript shows the detective made up a ‘sob story’ about having a terminally ill parent that needed to know how to grow cannabis plants in order to help alleviate her pain.

The shop assistant, 25-year-old Reuben Wade, sold the undercover detective a book on how to grow cannabis and some fertiliser. He was consequently arrested and charged with two counts of supplying drug-related equipment.

The same book can be purchased from Whitcoulls, along with 179 other marijuana-related titles.

High school strip search in breach?



ROTORUA BOYS' High School has found itself in the spotlight after 32 complaints from concerned family members alleging their sons were forced to strip to their underwear and drink significant amounts of water before urinating into a cup.

Investigators from New Zealand Education Consultants have produced a report that argues the school's approach to drug testing could infringe the Bill of Rights.

Dennis Finn, the school's Statutory Manager, has refused to apologise and said he would be meeting with a lawyer to see if the practice could continue because it happens in the hostel, not the school.

A former student who was subjected to a strip search said he was “disgusted” by his treatment and that it had taken place without his parents' knowledge or consent.

'The Insider' blows his whistle downunder



DR JEFFREY Wigand, the tobacco industry whistleblower portrayed by Russell Crowe in the movie *The Insider*, met with the Maori Affairs Select Committee in June to discuss the inner workings of tobacco corporations.

He was brought to New Zealand with the help of anti-smoking group ASH for the purpose of addressing the select committee's inquiry into tobacco.

Dr Wigand said the tobacco industry had lied in their previous submissions to the committee. He said that their claim that additives were used for flavour – not to enhance nicotine levels or absorption – was a lie and that their claim that they have no marketing strategies to target particular groups such as Māori or youth was also a lie.

Putting the P into policing

POLICE HIRED a drug dealer as a constable for three years until he was found guilty of two methamphetamine supply charges.

Chee Kent Tan, who purchased P from a crime syndicate operating out of Auckland's SkyCity Casino, was caught when detectives busted the drug ring in May. In total, the group had laundered at least \$11 million through the casino.

Six months after being hired (in October 2006), he was arrested and charged for

Quotes of Substance

“Efforts to combat drug trafficking by destroying shrines are rather like bulldozing tattoo parlours to get rid of biker gangs.”

Author **D E Campbell** says a Mexican cult with a following of 2–5 million who worship Santa Muerte have had three dozen of their shrines bulldozed by the Mexican Army as a part of the “psychological war on narcoculture”.

“Forty years later, the concern about drugs and drug problems is, if anything, magnified, intensified. We've never worked the drug problem holistically. We'll arrest the drug dealer, but we leave the addiction.”

US Drug Czar **Gil Kerlikowske** concedes the 40-year US\$1 trillion war on drugs has failed.

“The day you continue to put the price of tobacco up, you merely drive people to a cheaper substance – marijuana.”

Talkback host **John Tamihere** fails to provide a good reason to keep cigarette prices low. ■

the purchase of approximately \$420,000 worth of P. He was suspended on full pay for three years until his conviction this year.

Tan was sentenced in the High Court in June to seven years in prison.

No change to adult drink drive limit

CABINET HAS rejected lowering the adult drink drive limit, but has instead introduced new road safety measures targeting young and repeat drink drivers.

Alcohol Healthwatch director Rebecca Williams called the government “gutless”, saying there was public support for lowering the limit.

Professor Doug Sellman, from the National Addiction Centre, said the government lacked leadership, and the Alcohol Advisory Council said the decision was disappointing.

Transport Minister Steven Joyce acknowledged advice that lowering the limit would save lives.

“They also tell you that, if you didn’t allow anyone to have any alcohol, you would save more lives, and if you actually didn’t let anybody drive, it would save the lot.”

‘Party central’ warning

EXCESSIVE DRINKING at the Rugby World Cup will result in deaths from acute alcohol poisoning, warned a specialist on clinical intoxication.

Dr Geoff Robinson, Capital and Coast DHB Chief Medical Officer, said the government’s World Cup Empowering Bill will only serve to create greater access to alcohol.

His warning followed a coroner’s report showing a 58-year-old Porirua man died

of acute alcohol poisoning at the Rugby Sevens tournament.

Robinson said parallels could be drawn between the excessive drinking at the Sevens tournament and what was likely to happen during the party atmosphere of the World Cup.

RWC Minister Murray McCully denied the government was giving easier access to liquor licences “but simply being realistic about the extraordinary hospitality requirements” of the tournament.

Taranaki P dealer hands himself into Police

P DEALER Leith Castle asked media to join him while he handed over ten \$200 bags of P at the New Plymouth Police station, along with a glass pipe used to smoke it and two bags of marijuana.

“I want it recognised so it doesn’t just get taken off me and I get thrown out of the door,” he said.

Detective Sergeant Greg Gray was flabbergasted by the confession.

“As strange as it is, we don’t often have drug dealers come in and offer themselves up,” he said.

Castle told media he believed the Police were following him in the hope that he’d lead them to a big supplier. He was arrested and charged with possession of methamphetamine for supply.

Ketamine to be illegal

THE GOVERNMENT has made ketamine a class C drug, which means it is now in the same category as cannabis. The painkiller will continue to be legal for veterinarians and for use in some instances of human surgery. ■

Australia’s elite forces tested for drugs in Afghanistan



THE ENTIRE Australian elite Special Forces Task Group in Afghanistan has been tested for drug use after a soldier ended up unconscious in his room.

The commando was found at Australia’s Tarin Kowt base, collapsed from an assumed drug overdose after attending a party. A bottle of pills and white powder thought to be an opiate were at his side.

The Australian government is concerned a pattern may develop with its own troops similar to one among US troops – with high levels of drug abuse and suicide.

Figures published in the *Sunday Telegraph* showed that, in the five years leading up to 2009, 653 soldiers, airmen and sailors had returned to Australia testing positive for drugs.

Mephedrone overshadows Britain’s vital alcohol review

A REPORT from Britain’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, which criticises the British government’s alcohol policies, was released the same day a ban on mephedrone was distractingly recommended – despite the report having been completed nine months prior.

The report suggests pubs and restaurants should use a ‘standard measure’, so drinks contain equivalent amounts of alcohol. This means that, instead of measuring drinks

arbitrarily – i.e. a ‘large’ or ‘small’ glass of wine – they should be measured in units of alcohol, so customers can better understand how much they are consuming.

Succession of Mexican musician murders



MEXICAN MUSICIANS performing songs that celebrate the lives of drug barons have become the targets of competing drug gangs, with Mexican media reporting several such deaths in recent years.

The latest case is that of Sergio Vega (known as El Shaka), who was murdered while driving his Cadillac to a concert in the northern Mexican state of Sinaloa.

Ironically, he’d just come from an interview in which he’d quashed false rumours of his death.

“It’s happened to me for years now. Someone tells a radio station or a newspaper I’ve been killed or suffered an accident... and then I have to call my dear mum, who has heart trouble, to reassure her,” said Vega.

En route to the concert, he was shot at and injured by following gunmen. His vehicle crashed, and he was then killed at close range by shots to the chest and head.

At least seven Mexican

musicians have been killed over the past three years in similar circumstances.

Medicinal marijuana gets green light



SATIVEX – a marijuana spray that is applied under the tongue to ease multiple sclerosis patients' muscle rigidity – is now legal under prescription in Britain and Spain.

Its producer, GW Pharmaceuticals, has been growing Sativex's genetically cloned marijuana plants covertly in England.

In 2005, Canada approved Sativex as the world's first legal marijuana medicine.

The product is also being tested as a pain relief drug for patients with advanced cancer.

Counter-narcotics drones are 'go' in Latin America



LATIN AMERICAN nations are increasingly using unmanned drone aircraft (UAVs) in counter-narcotics assignments. The drones are the latest addition to Latin America's anti-drug efforts and have been utilised across the jungles of South America, in Mexico and in parts of the Caribbean.

Israel Aerospace Industries (which has offices in Chile,

Ecuador and Colombia) has recently struck multimillion-dollar deals in Ecuador and Brazil for the production of their huge 54-foot wingspan 'Heron drone' model.

The Latin American countries are following the lead of the US, which, as early as 2004, was testing the 34-foot wingspan 'Hermes drone' to patrol the Mexican border.

US Defence Department spokesperson Commander Bob Mehal said drones are key in supporting US allies around the world in efforts to curb the illegal narcotics trade, but would not elaborate on details.

The Pentagon has also established the Comalapa air base in El Salvador as an overseas 'forward operating location' for counter-drug drone missions, in collaboration with Latin American governments.

Just three cents a day for HIV prevention



THE INTERNATIONAL Harm Reduction Association (IHRA) has released a report exposing a huge funding gap that is frustrating efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in Asia and Eastern Europe.

IHRA estimates that, in 2007, about \$160 million was

put into HIV-related harm reduction in low and middle income countries (90 percent of this funding came from international donors).

This spending equated to US\$12.80 for each injector each year or just three US cents per injector per day.

"Three cents a day is a terrifying figure, and equally terrifying are the HIV infection rates amongst injecting drug users in parts of Eastern Europe and Asia... More money is needed for harm reduction, and it is needed now," said co-author Professor Gerry Stimson.

IHRA's full report is available at www.ihra.net.

Texas Police make record weed seizure

CORPUS CHRISTI Police believed they had completed one of the largest cannabis confiscations in the city's history after a kid called to say he had spotted marijuana plants growing in a local park.

The police removed 300–400 plants only to later find out their record haul was nothing more than a common weed known as horsemint.

'Prince of Pot' extradited

MARC EMERY, Vancouver's so-called 'Prince of Pot', has been extradited to the US where he is expected to plead guilty to selling marijuana seeds by mail to US customers.

Mr Emery's attorney said his client would plead guilty to one charge of drug distribution in exchange for a five-year sentence.

According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration, his seeds were traced to illicit marijuana-growing outfits in Montana, Virginia, Michigan,

New Jersey, Indiana, Florida, Tennessee and North Dakota.

Mr Emery's wife said, "My husband committed a crime punishable by only a \$200 fine in Canada, yet this conservative government is sending him to serve up to 25 years in US jail."

Cambodia's drug 'rehab' centres investigated



CAMBODIAN DRUG users, including children, have been arbitrarily confined in detention centres where they have been subjected to "terrible abuses and sadistic violence", according to a report released by Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The report shows that, while these detention centres are meant to treat and 'rehabilitate' drug users, people are instead being subjected to beatings with electrical wire, forced labour, electric shocks, harsh military drills, rape, forced blood donations, painful physical punishments (such as being chained up while standing in the sun) and are fed rotten or insect-ridden food.

UNICEF provides direct funding for one of these centres and has promised to look into reported abuses, but according to HRW, nothing much has yet been done.

Earlier this year, UNICEF released a statement saying that Cambodia's Ministry of Social Affairs had found no evidence of "major violations" at the centre.

HRW conducted in-depth interviews with 53 former detainees, 17 of whom had spent time at the UNICEF centre.

Ideas that seem okay when you're drunk...

A 36-YEAR-OLD drunk man broke into an Australian wildlife park in northern West Australia and sat on top of a 5-metre saltwater crocodile called Fatso. Fatso, it seems, took offence, spun around and chomped down on the man's right knee.

The man, who had been turfed out of a Broome tavern for being drunk, told Police he climbed into Fatso's enclosure because he wanted to give him a pat.

The wound is serious, and the man is currently battling infection but is in a stable condition at Broome Hospital.

Attending Police officer Sergeant Roger Haynes said the man, who was not a local, was extremely lucky to be alive.

"We do know he's from the eastern states, and he doesn't seem to have a very good understanding of the nature of saltwater crocs in the Kimberley."

Indonesian baby tobacco addict

INTERNET FOOTAGE of a smoking baby boy in Indonesia has gained significant western media attention. The 2-year-old, Ardi Rizal, is said to smoke 40 cigarettes a day.

Ardi is an extreme case but part of a worrying trend. According to Indonesia's

Central Statistics Agency, a quarter of Indonesian children aged 3 to 15 have tried cigarettes, with 3 percent of those being active smokers.

Indonesia's Health Minister said it was hard to stop kids smoking in a country where the tobacco industry has associated itself so deeply with positive things like educational scholarships and sporting events.

A Bill on tobacco control has recently been held up due to resistance from the tobacco industry.

Indonesia is the world's third-largest tobacco consumer.

Bloodshed in Mexican rehab clinics



MEXICO'S DRUG war death toll has risen yet again after gunmen opened fire on a drug rehabilitation centre in the city of Gómez Palacio, killing nine and wounding nine.

The incident follows a string of violent attacks on drug rehab clinics, which began in 2008 in the city of Ciudad Juárez where, in one attack, eight patients were murdered.

In the same city in 2009, another 27 people were murdered in two separate rehab clinic attacks, and again in early June of this year, carloads of hooded gunmen killed 19 more in Chihuahua city.

Authorities suspect these massacres are an attempt to deter other drug addicts from quitting their habit and said that, of late, the domestic

market has become more important to Mexican drug cartels.

If your mate wants to shoot you in the buttocks with an air rifle, respect his reasons



TWO 34-YEAR-OLD Australian men needed surgery after shooting each other in the buttocks with an air rifle during a drinking session. Police said the men did it to see if it would hurt. Apparently, it did. The men thought they were fine, except for a bit of pain, but two days later (presumably when the effects of the beers had worn off), both were hospitalised to have pellets removed from their buttocks and legs. One of the men has been stripped of his firearms licence over the incident.

Vienna Declaration calls for an end to war on drugs

IN JUNE, leading AIDS scientists, doctors and campaigners appealed for signatures to the Vienna Declaration, a document that calls for fundamental changes in global policies towards injecting drug users. Their aim is to slow the spread of HIV.

The Declaration states: "The criminalisation of illicit drug users is fuelling the HIV epidemic and has resulted in overwhelmingly negative health and social consequences. A full policy reorientation is needed... Reorienting drug policies

towards evidence-based approaches that respect, protect and fulfil human rights has the potential to reduce harms deriving from current policies and would allow for the redirection of the vast financial resources towards where they are needed most: implementing and evaluating evidence-based prevention, regulatory, treatment and harm reduction interventions."

Sign up to the declaration at www.viennadeclaration.com.

Tobacco giant exploits child labour

GLOBAL TOBACCO giant Philip Morris International was found to be using child labour on farms that supply its Kazakhstan cigarette factory.

A Human Rights Watch report, based on interviews with 68 farm workers, found that child labour is widespread on the tobacco farms. The international human rights group also expressed serious concerns over the conditions of migrant workers.

The report said that employing children as young as 10 on tobacco farms is particularly hazardous because they are very vulnerable to the tobacco farming process.

The Marlboro brand cigarette manufacturer has acknowledged the concerns, saying it has taken immediate action following the "hellish work" report, which prompted it to change its policies.

"A company like Philip Morris certainly has the resources to put an end to these practices," Jane Buchanan, the report's author and senior HRW researcher, said in an interview.

Philip Morris said it is "firmly opposed to child labour". ■

Smoke dope and become one?

If we are to believe recent media hype about the link between cannabis and educational failure, the future for our youth is bleak indeed. Mythbusters digs behind the headlines to weed out the truth.

“POTHEADS FAIL at school.” “Early stoners lose education.” “Smoke dope and become one, study warns.” These headlines all appeared on various high-profile New Zealand media outlets in response to new research evaluating cannabis use and educational achievement. If these claims are true, New Zealand is in serious trouble.

Our rates of cannabis use are among the highest in the world. According to the 2007/2008 New Zealand Alcohol and Drug Use Survey, about half the population aged over 16 (46.4 percent) had used cannabis at some point in their lifetime, representing 1,224,600 people. The median age at which this group had first tried cannabis was 17 years. Overall, one in three New Zealanders who had ever used cannabis had first tried it when they were aged 15–17 years, and one in six had first tried cannabis when aged 14 years or younger.

Tellingly, most news coverage did not report any actual numerical results from this research, preferring sweeping pronouncements such as “the younger people start smoking cannabis, the more likely they are to fail in the education system”.

But how much more likely are they to fail? And is this failure really due to smoking cannabis at a young age? The risk factors and life pathways for early cannabis use overlap considerably with those for poor educational outcomes. To find out more, Mythbusters studied the research paper behind the media claims and also reviewed other literature in this area.

The media’s interest stemmed from the combined findings of three

Australasian cohort studies, including the long-running Christchurch Health and Development Study. The researchers analysed the relationship between the age of onset of cannabis use (<15 years, 15–17 years or never before 18) and measures of educational achievement (high school completion, entry into university and degree attainment).

Importantly, they attempted to take into account potential confounding factors such as socio-demographic background, parental education, family functioning and childhood achievement prior to the onset of cannabis use.

Compared with those who first used cannabis before age 15, those who had never used by 18 had odds of high school completion 2.4–4.1 times greater, odds of university enrolment 1.8–2.9 times greater and odds of degree attainment 3.0–4.4 times greater. But once adjustments were made for the potential confounders the researchers had identified, these odds reduced considerably, though they remained statistically significant.

Risk estimates suggested that the early use of cannabis accounted for 17 percent of the overall rate of failure to complete high school, 5 percent of the overall rate of failure to attend university and 3 percent of the overall rate of failure to attain a university degree.

But is early use of cannabis the real cause of these poorer educational outcomes? It is notoriously difficult to make causal inferences from observational studies. Firstly, there is always the possibility of uncontrolled, residual confounding – for example, genetic factors or personality differences – that

were not taken into account during the analysis. Secondly, there is the possibility of a reverse causal association, whereby educational under-achievement leads to the increased use of cannabis rather than the other way round. Other limitations from this research include between-study differences in data collection methods, confounders assessed and attrition rates.

The study authors themselves called for “further research that would discount possible alternative explanations of the association between cannabis use and educational achievement, including the issues of uncontrolled residual confounding and reverse causality”.

So what does all this actually mean?

There does appear to be an association between early age of first cannabis use and subsequent poorer educational achievement, but that does not mean, as the headlines suggest, that we can assume all youngsters who use cannabis are condemned to life on the educational scrapheap. We are a long way from conclusive proof of that. Mythbusters wholeheartedly endorses the study authors’ call for more research and hopes the media takes heed.

Sensationalist reporting may sell newspapers but does nothing to advance a mature debate on a complex social issue. There are many good reasons to discourage young people from using cannabis, but not all young people who experiment with cannabis are doomed to academic failure. ■

For references used in this Mythbusters, visit www.drugfoundation.org.nz/mythbusters.

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