

DSICA Column – National Liquor News – July 2007

Insight on Alcohol

By Gordon Broderick

A couple of months ago I appeared on SBS's *Insight* program to discuss alcohol issues. For those who don't know, *Insight* is a well-respected weekly current affairs program that profiles topical issues. The general format is that half a dozen or so 'experts' are selected to form a panel, and a small selected audience interacts with the presenter and panel to provide a *vox pop* on the matter under discussion.

The program I appeared on was entitled 'Under the Influence'. The panel included an hotelier, a member from the AHA, a number of health advocates and academics, a police officer, councillor and local magistrate. The program was ostensibly about 24 hour liquor licences, but the topics discussed were broad ranging – covering underage drinking, explanations of the standard drink concept, and the drinking habits of two amongst others local Kalgoorlie girls.

The program itself was generally well-balanced, but the format did not allow follow-up question to challenge the comments made by other panel members. There were several comments made on the program that deserve a response.

Firstly, one health advocate asserted that data from the *Australian secondary school students' use of alcohol in 2005* showed that levels of risky and high-risk drinking by 12- to 15-year-old children who are current drinkers were "higher than ever". So what does the survey actually say?

It says that with respect the 12- to 15-year-olds "there was little change in the proportions drinking at these harmful levels ... over the survey period". But more significantly the study found that the proportion of students aged between 12 and 15 drinking the month before the survey decreased significantly between 1999 and 2005, and that in 2005, 82% of 12- to 15-year-olds had ever tried alcohol, which was significantly lower than that reported in 2002 (86%) and 1999 (87%).

It also found that significantly fewer 12- to 15-year-olds had drunk in the past month in 2005 (34%) compared to 2002 (43%) and 1999 (43%). And finally, that in 2005, 22% of 12- to 15-year-olds were current drinkers, which was significantly lower than that reported in 2002 (29%) and 1999 (28%).

Overall, the picture was that drinking levels of 12- to 15-year-olds were 'significantly lower' than that found in previous surveys!

Another health advocate claimed that based on a study in the United States the alcohol industry obtained 40 per cent of its income from underage drinkers. He also mentioned that 80 per cent of alcohol sold in Australia is bought by people who drink it in a high risk way.

DSICA is always wary about comparing underage drinking in the United States with underage drinking in Australia. The minimum drinking age of 21 in the United States makes any meaningful comparison highly problematic.

That said, the panel member probably based his comments on a study carried out in the US by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA). This study found that the combined value of underage drinking and adult pathological drinking to the industry was at least \$US48.3 billion dollars, or 37.5 per cent of consumer expenditures for alcohol.

This study was reported widely around the world, but generally received very little critical evaluation. However, one organisation decided to investigate these claims. A review was conducted by STATS, a non-profit, non-partisan organisation affiliated with George Mason University in Virginia. In DSICA's view the STATS critique all but demolishes the CASA study.

With respect to the figure that 80 per cent of alcohol bought in Australia is being consumed a high risk way, DSICA is unaware of any research whatsoever that supports this claim.

At the moment that alcohol industry appears to be under a barrage of criticism from various quarters. Much of this appears to be based on anecdote and myth. In the current environment it is important that our industry faces up to its responsibilities, but at the same time does not let inaccuracies or falsehoods go unchallenged.