

# Nation Liquor News

## DSICA Column — November 2007

### Patterns Approach to Drinking

**By Gordon Broderick**

According to *World Drink Trends*, Australia ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world in terms of per capita alcohol consumption. Our per capita spirits consumption ranking is even lower at 36<sup>th</sup>. Overall Australia's per capita alcohol consumption ranks in the middle range of the table, and is hardly the alcohol drenched nation that some would portray. Interesting, Australia's moderate per capita alcohol consumption level is often used by health bureaucratic as a proxy for harms. In their simply arithmetic, less per capita consumption = less harm. DSICA considers this approach requires a rethink.

Quite simply, it is people's pattern of drinking that best predicts whether they will experience positive or negative consequences of their alcohol consumption. What is important is how a person drinks; how much they drink is only one part of that. This is a significant departure from the basis of alcohol policies in many countries and therefore requires a new approach to the development of national alcohol policies.

Alcohol policies in many countries have long been based on the assumption that a wide range of health and social problems associated with the abuse of alcohol can be directly correlated with average daily per capita alcohol consumption. In light of increasing empirical evidence, this central hypothesis has been increasingly challenged.

There is already declining political support for controls over the availability of alcohol in many countries. There is also growing dissatisfaction among scientists with simple measures of volume of alcohol consumption as a basis for understanding drinking behaviour. It is therefore important to distinguish between negative and positive drinking patterns. Negative drinking patterns should be modified by reducing heavy drinking occasions and by reducing specific adverse consequences. Positive drinking patterns should be promoted by focusing on safe drinking limits, by educating people for responsible drinking and by encouraging individual choice.

Many different people have an interest in seeing alcohol policies that actually work. Politicians and public servants in the health, social affairs, trade, agriculture and finance sectors; medical and other health practitioners and social workers; public health practitioners and advocates; scientists and scholars from a wide range of disciplines; those working in the production and distribution of beverage alcohol and in the hospitality industry; and concerned individuals around the world who devote their time and energies to promoting responsible use of alcohol, fighting alcohol misuse and seeking to improve the quality of life of all.

The role of alcohol differs widely between different cultures and sub-cultures, underscoring the need to move away from a policy paradigm which attempts to impose a uniform solution on a widely diverse world. Measurement of average drinking levels has proven inadequate in addressing the outcomes for a large segment of the drinking population, in particular for those individuals with light or moderate alcohol consumption. As recent medical evidence has demonstrated, even total abstention from alcohol may be associated with health risks. Therefore, in predicting outcome, it is more important to address the patterns in which individuals drink than simply how much they drink.

In a policy context it is therefore important to assess the effectiveness of various control measures on reducing adverse outcomes of alcohol consumption, both from a historical perspective and with a focus on measures currently implemented in a number of countries around the world. Current measures of social cost may result in incorrect policy prescriptions and may thereby detract from areas truly meriting public intervention. A more flexible approach to alcohol policy development is a proposal which emphasizes patterns of drinking and educational measures within their appropriate cultural context. This more integrative approach could provide a viable alternative to the more rigid command and control policies of the past.

Measurement of the parameters of alcohol consumption reveal more detail about specific drinking behaviours and their relationship with particular outcomes in diverse cultures. New approaches to prevention, education, and screening must cover the full spectrum of use from abstainers and very light drinkers to excessive and dependent drinkers. DSICA consider that the way ahead lies in greater attention to measures which focus on preventing problems associated with particular harmful patterns of drinking and less attention to general population measures which restrict all access.