

New research: alcohol rates rise

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MARK COLVIN: It's been something of a puzzle for public health advocates. How could Australians be drinking less alcohol at the same time as alcohol-fuelled social and health problems were on the rise?

A new study might well have found the answer. Researchers at Curtin University in Western Australia say that in fact alcohol consumption is on the rise. They say previous estimates have failed to take proper account of factors like an increase in wine sales.

Simon Santow reports.

SIMON SANTOW: Associate Professor Tanya Chikritzhs led a study conducted by the National Drug Research Institute at Perth's Curtin University. She helped find the flaws in the assumptions previously made on alcohol consumption.

TANYA CHIKRITZHS: There has been a bit of head scratching in the research community, alcohol research community in Australia because we've been aware that alcohol caused hospitalisations and various harm's been increasing over time in Australia in all states and territories the last few decades and we had an inkling that there was probably something up with the per capita consumption estimate as they were for Australia and we knew from research in the US that the alcohol contents of wine in that nation had been increasing over time. There is data collected by urine monitors which showed that consumption in Australia was increasing.

So it was of great interest to us when in early this year the Australian Bureau of Statistics produced its latest estimates of consumption showing that it had worked out new assumptions about alcohol content in wine, that they showed a marked increase. Put that together with an increase in wine consumption generally, so an increase in market share for wine across Australia, the two make up for a significant increase in alcohol consumption in Australia, and increasing trends in consumption overall.

SIMON SANTOW: Wine was rated on average as having 11.4 per cent alcohol level when the real figure was closer to 12.7 per cent.

TANYA CHIKRITZHS: So it's quite a difference and it makes up, over time, it makes for a difference in trends. So our past alcohol policies, our past approach to alcohol related issues in this country have been based on the assumption that things aren't getting any worse in terms of consumption when the reality is in actual fact they have been increasing steadily for over a decade.

SIMON SANTOW: Tanya Chikritzhs says the work should give fresh impetus to efforts to tackle excess alcohol consumption in Australia.

TANYA CHIKRITZHS: It even adds a little bit more backing to the Government's move to implement the alcopops tax because I mean when it comes down to it, these sort of impartial sales data are extremely important.

We also collect information about what people think they're drinking or they self-report but it's typically unreliable.

SIMON SANTOW: You mentioned before the increasing consumption of wine and that being a major factor. What about the so-called the warehouse-style liquor barns and the involvement of supermarkets in selling alcohol?

TANYA CHIKRITZHS: Well look I mean I guess they're an increasingly obvious picture of the liquor landscape in Australia as we're seeing more, very large, megastores discounting alcohol with very, enormous capacity to sell cheap alcohol and we know that price really does matter in terms of how much people consume.

The other contributing component in Australia is, you know, cask wine for instance used to dominate the wine market in Australia. It doesn't so much anymore. It's only about 40 per cent or thereabout but it used to be about 70 per cent. But now we have other products like clean skins which can be extremely cheap. I mean as cheap as orange juice. I mean cask wine certainly is as cheap as orange juice or milk.

So I mean we've got a lot of cheap alcohol out there which has high alcohol content that beer, several times higher alcohol content to beer, and which is gaining an increasing proportion of the market and for which the alcohol content has actually increased over time.

So you put all these together and what we see now is an increasingly level of alcohol consumption.

SIMON SANTOW: The dangers of alcohol have also been highlighted in a report just published in the British medical journal, The Lancet. Its authors say alcohol is more addictive than crack cocaine and heroin.

The director of the Alcohol and Drug Service at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, Dr Alex Wodak, agrees with the controversial findings.

ALEX WODAK: I think it's partly because alcohol seems so innocuous, it seems so safe that people unfortunately draw that conclusion that it really is safe and a lot of people have far too much alcohol either because they drink a huge quantity in a short period of time or they consistently drink far too much over a long period of time.

SIMON SANTOW: Dr Wodak says he would like Australian authorities to raise taxes on alcohol. That, he says, would make alcohol much harder to come by.

MARK COLVIN: Simon Santow.