

Alcohol and Cancer: no safe level of consumption (ABC)

By Julie Morgan King

It was a few years ago. We sat quietly together sipping tea, wiping away tears and chatting about our mums. Mothers Day was approaching and we felt miserable. Our mothers had died too young, mine from thyroid cancer which killed her fifteen weeks after diagnosis and hers after a long struggle with breast cancer.

My friend loves a drink. She wouldn't identify with the more than four million Australians who say they drink alcohol with the aim of getting drunk, a terrifying statistic cited in a report commissioned by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation.

Her frequent drunkenness seems to be an inevitable conclusion to happy nights out socialising with friends.

Somehow a door opened in that conversation and the moment seemed right to creep in and ever so gently ask her whether alcohol might put her at risk, given the medical history of her mother.

"My doctor said there is no absolutely no link between breast cancer and alcohol. I'd rather give up food than my wine."

She and her doctor might want to rethink their views, given recent Cancer Council guidelines which now state there is no safe level of alcohol consumption. The Council's chief executive Professor Ian Olver has revised his previous stance about moderate consumption in the light of new evidence, and now regards alcohol as "one of the most carcinogenic products in common use".

It seems abstaining altogether is the only way to reduce the risk of developing certain cancers particularly for people with other risk factors such as family history.

After my mum died I decided to give up alcohol. There were many reasons for the decision: a vague unease that alcohol and living in a cancer affected family didn't make for a good mix; an ongoing medical problem; raising children and wanting them to know another way of living; headaches after

nights out. The bottom line was there was so much to worry about with drinking, that giving it up was easy.

The Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation report also stated that 80 per cent of Australians believe the nation has a drinking problem.

I am surprised by that pearl. Looking around, I would say this pickled nation is steeped in denial.

When Matthew Chesher, Chief of Staff to the Minister for Roads resigned following his arrest for ecstasy possession, the reaction of the general public was illuminating. Letters to editors and countless bloggers demonstrated overwhelming support for him and derision for the police. Many commented on the hypocrisy of the circumstances. How could this happen when every day, pubs and bars are full of drunks who never cop the full brunt of the law - unless of course they pee in public or clobber someone. Why didn't police spend our taxes fighting real crime?

Mr Chesher's drug habit was compared to a few drinks down at the pub with mates after work. A cultural institution and part of our national identity and linked to that sacred but over worked concept: mateship. The great Aussie fun- loving, easy going beer and skittles moral high ground was outraged.

It isn't drinkers and drug takers who are pariahs in our community. It's people like me. The decision to quit may have been easy, but living grog free in this community remains a huge challenge.

For those who don't fancy socialising with drunks, going out is best avoided. I'd rather sit in the gutter outside a pub sticking pins into my eyes than venture inside. The volume rises as the bellies swell and the eyes glaze over. Pick your pub with care and leave early. Do you know how many glassing incidents occur late at night when tempers and blood alcohol levels are boiling? Pubs don't report incidents because the next step is to be put on watch. Plastic cups come out and the patrons bolt.

You might wonder why I worry about places I'm unlikely to be seen dead in. It's the adult offspring who live the night owl existence, not me. Adolescent boys and grog are a well known toxic mix. What is not acknowledged is that adolescent boys almost always emulate or evolve into their fathers, regardless of the relationship. And this is where it gets tricky, as health experts readily concur. Try asking a colony of middle aged best mates to navel gaze for a minute or two and self assess their drinking.

“Nuh... not going to do that... no problem here... it’s those drunken hooligans that are the trouble... I’m fine... piss off and leave me alone.”

Until one of them is diagnosed with liver cancer.

Young women hang out with teenage boys, and sculling vodka is a popular past time these days. Drunken girls are unlikely to be violent. They are breathtakingly vulnerable though, and far more likely to engage in grubby or risky sexual behaviour which if they remember later, may deeply regret.

I met a guy once, just one lonely single sock who didn’t drink. Orange juice was his preferred thirst quencher. What was it really like, a guy not drinking?

“Boring mostly” he said, “especially late at night when parties are warming up. That’s when I leave.”

I never understood this until I stopped drinking and took a look around. The conviviality of drinking is ubiquitous and exclusive. For non drinkers, parties lose their gloss and conversations don't sparkle much beyond dessert. The drinkers in the group warm up as their jokes fade or get repeated.

It might come up in conversation, this bizarre life choice of mine; we non drinkers are a rare species. People are understandably curious. I try to dodge explanations: anything I say could sound like gloating. But their defensiveness lurks. It is as if my choice speaks volumes about their habits, even if I’ve never met them before.

“Everything is OK in moderation.”

Then comes their evidence: “What about the French and the Italians? They start drinking when they're in nappies and they're healthy.”

Often I need to beg for a drink when I am out, because if it isn't grog I want there is an assumption that I’m not thirsty. And if I am thirsty, surely tap water will do?

I've been badgered to drink, just because repeat offering is a way of demonstrating social inclusion.

"Sure you won't have a drink? Just a drop?"

"It's OK really." Lately I have been more assertive.

"I haven't had a drink for nine years. I'm fine thanks."

I know a non drinker who cites alcoholism as her reason for not drinking. Shock and embarrassment shuts down all discussion and though she gains an ill deserved reputation, it allows her peace to get on with the business of living without alcohol.

For it is noble to live in abstinence, in defiance of addiction. With the Cancer Council's report, non drinkers will always be wowzers, but well informed wowzers nonetheless. "Grog causes cancer" provides a credible excuse for a peddling upstream.

Apparently only 9 per cent of Victorians are aware of the link between alcohol consumption and cancer. The Cancer Council needs to get moving. Bring on the ads. And start the debate about warnings on labels.

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