

## **Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand's (ALAC) 'Working Together Conference'**

Good morning. Thank you for your kind introduction and thanks to all of you for taking the time from your undoubtedly busy schedule to attend ALAC's 11th working together conference.

It is a great pleasure to be invited to speak at this conference, particularly given my own history with ALAC.

As many of you may be aware, I worked for ALAC as deputy chief executive and acting chief executive for a number of years prior to my election Parliament, so I am very happy to be returning to this interesting and important area through my responsibility for National Drug Policy as Associate Minister of Health.

I start from the position that most New Zealanders enjoy alcohol moderately and socially in their daily lives. That is good, and as it should be, and fully in line with ALAC's mandate of promoting the moderate use.

I want to acknowledge ALAC's work in pursuit of this objective and make it clear that I am very keen to work closely with it to continue to encourage the moderate and responsible use of alcohol.

ALAC has a unique role, both through its single focus, and its status as an autonomous Crown Entity. It is a strength I want to build on.

We should never forget, however, that, for a minority of New Zealanders, alcohol can be a dangerous companion, with often disastrous consequences for them, their families, friends and workmates.

While my comments this morning will focus largely on some of the negative consequences for affected individuals and the community of excessive alcohol use, I want to keep things in perspective.

We ARE talking about a minority of New Zealanders, and our policy response always has to be geared towards helping them both avoid at risk situations and overcome their problems, with minimal inconvenience to the majority for whom alcohol use will never be a concern.

Against that background, it is sobering in every sense of that word to reflect upon the costs alcohol has on our society.

We know the costs are huge and the impacts felt by a number of sectors. Recently, a study jointly funded by the Ministry of Health and the Accident Compensation Corporation made some dramatic findings. For example:

- Harmful alcohol use in New Zealand in 2005/06 cost was estimated to cost \$4.8 billion, with an additional 0.6 billion attributed to joint alcohol and other drugs use.
- Of this figure, \$500 million was from crime costs, reflecting the costs to victims, the use of Police resources, court-related and prison costs.
- A further \$1.6 billion was attributed to the cost of injuries.

The report estimated that half of all alcohol is consumed in a harmful manner, emphasising the tendency of some New Zealanders to binge drink.

Police have recently released statistics indicating at least 31% of reported offences in 2007/08 were committed where the offender had consumed alcohol.

Particularly worrying is the relationship between alcohol and violent offending. Approximately half of the homicides recorded over a ten-year period involved either a suspect or victim being under the influence of alcohol at the time. In cases of serious family violence, 34% of alleged offenders were identified as having alcohol present.

Emergency departments report that a significant percentage of their admissions, particularly over the weekend, are driven by misuse of alcohol.

In 2007, the World Health Organization conducted a study on alcohol and injury in emergency departments. Of the ten countries sampled, New Zealand had the second highest rates, with 36% of injured patients reporting they had consumed alcohol prior to their injury.

With the current pressures on our Health system, it is becoming increasingly important that we are aware of and consider how to address the impact alcohol is having on the availability of these important services.

The negative impact of alcohol is also of particular concern when it affects our young people. On a positive note, the 2007 Youth Survey reported a decrease in binge drinking by secondary school students.

However, the rate of binge drinking by secondary school students is still alarmingly high at 34.3%. In addition, students reported experiencing a number of problems after drinking alcohol; including having unsafe sex, having unwanted sex, being injured, and having done things that could have got them into serious trouble – such as stealing.

I know I am not telling you anything that you do not already know. All of you here today – whether you are members of the police, licensing authorities, local government or community leaders or work in the treatment sector – grapple daily with the fall-out from alcohol misuse.

The research I have mentioned today is important as it emphasises and quantifies the substantial impact that alcohol has on our society.

While many people drink without harming themselves or others, the misuse of alcohol by some results in considerable health, social and economic costs.

These costs are borne by individuals, families and the wider community. We need to be careful, however, that we do not fall into the trap of letting a so-called broad brush approach become a synonym for a once-over lightly approach that has little impact on problem drinkers, and just antagonises and irritates the majority.

I was delighted to be able to open the World Health Organization Western Pacific Region technical consultation meeting held in Auckland in March. Representatives from 27 countries discussed and provided advice to WHO on issues for a global strategy. The discussion reiterated the fact that alcohol-related harm is an issue felt around the world.

Also of significant interest internationally, has been the work currently undertaken by the Scottish Government.

The discussion paper *Changing Scotland's Relationship with Alcohol* and their proposed *Framework for Action* has led to a lot of interesting and, at times, emotional discussion.

It has not only raised the profile of alcohol-related harm, but also highlighted potential policy options that could be applied.

I see the keynote speaker after morning tea is Dr Peter Rice, who will be speaking about the alcohol policy developments in Scotland. I am sure this will be a thought provoking address and will raise some interesting points and policy ideas to help stimulate discussion during the remainder of the conference.

In New Zealand, the increasing availability of alcohol over the last 20 years has raised concerns about the impact this may be having on the levels of alcohol-related harm in New Zealand.

It is therefore extremely important that our legislation regarding the sale and supply of alcohol is informed by expert evidence and draws on local and international best practice.

Consequently the New Zealand Law Commission has been asked to review the regulatory framework under which alcohol is supplied and promoted. This is a 'first principles' review that provides an opportunity to reflect on the frameworks in place to control alcohol.

It is taking into account contemporary use patterns, societal attitudes and new evidence, all with a view to preventing and reducing harms from alcohol now and into the future. My colleague, the Minister of Justice, Simon Power, has asked the Law Commission to expedite the review and a public discussion document will now be published in July 2009, followed by a final report in June 2010.

I am very pleased that ALAC has taken advantage of the opportunity presented by this conference and invited the Law Commission to attend and host a plenary session.

It is great that you will get a chance to discuss with them the range of options for regulating alcohol in New Zealand and provide your input into this important review. I hope everyone attending today will also be making submissions once the Law Commission has released its public discussion document.

In addition to the review, you may be aware that there is also a Bill before Parliament that would make more immediate changes to the legislation.

The Sale and Supply of Liquor and Liquor Enforcement Bill had its first reading in March and is now before the Justice and Electoral Select Committee.

The deadline for public submissions has now passed, so I hope that you took advantage of this opportunity to provide your views.

As drafted, the Bill will place more stringent controls on who can supply alcohol to a minor, provide for greater community input into licensing decisions, and tighten up on the types of premise that can sell alcohol

At best, regulation, however benign, can only ever be one a package of responses addressing alcohol-related problems.

It is generally on the frontline that change is instigated and enacted, therefore, it is essential that communities are encouraged and empowered to identify and respond to issues at the local level. Your discussion on 'what makes effective community action' this afternoon is likely to highlight the importance of this work and also the challenges faced by those engaged in it.

One area I am particularly keen to see a fresh focus upon is the responsibility of parents.

In my view, parents have to accept a greater responsibility for the behaviour of their children, where this is practicable, in areas such as the supply of alcohol, and the supervision of parties.

Overall, given the complex nature of alcohol-related issues, this is not an easy task, and I commend you for your efforts in this area.

Working across sectors always poses challenges; some would say it seems especially so for central government.

This is why the Government is developing a National Alcohol Action Plan which will ensure a co-ordinated whole-of-government response to alcohol-related harm.

The Action Plan will outline the Government's plans to reduce alcohol-related harm, both in terms of legislative and non-legislative actions. A draft of the Action Plan was released in September last year and elicited a large number of wide-ranging responses.

Given the change of government that has occurred since then, we are now reviewing the draft Action Plan to ensure it aligns to our priorities and will be effective in making a real difference to the level of alcohol-related harm experienced in New Zealand.

However, a legitimate cross-sector approach also has to involve working closely with those who produce alcohol.

I have no tolerance for those who hold to the old fashioned view that working with the industry is akin to collaboration with the enemy.

Never forget that they are your funders, and have a legitimate point of view to present.

As the producers of the product that you all spend so much time talking about, they also have an interest and a responsibility to promote and ensure its responsible use, and they must be at your table.

I would to thank ALAC again for creating this and many other opportunities for enforcement agency staff, policy makers, health workers and others stakeholders to come together to discuss the important issue of alcohol and what can be done to reduce the harm it causes in our society.

Given the significant costs of alcohol to our society, conferences such as these, which bring together a range of different viewpoints from different communities and sectors, are vital. Not only for sharing information and examples of best practice, but also for ensuring strong relationships are developed and maintained.

I hope what you take away from the next couple of days will include lots of ideas of things that could be implemented in your area, as well the names of people you can work with in the future.

I wish you all the best for your discussions and I look forward to hearing about some of the ideas that come out of this important event.