

Alcohol-Related Violence: The Ever-Present Problem

By Rachel Loveday

Every Saturday night without fail there are women standing in front of their mirrors, trying to decide on a pair of earrings to match their trendy, most likely body-hugging outfits. The men are most likely wearing jeans and a casual, yet, smart shirt in order to look good for the opposite sex.

After they have decided what to wear, they will most likely have a drink, or two, or three, or maybe even five before they actually leave the house for their big night out on the town. A woman's choice of liquid refreshment will most likely be a colourful drink such as, wine or Vodka Cruiser. A man's choice is most likely beer.

Most men and women are able to go out, dance and drink the night away and stagger home without any trouble, but some are not so fortunate. Alcohol-related violence and anti-social behaviour is an ever-present problem in the Wollongong Central Business District (CBD) as well as across New South Wales (NSW) and everyone from the federal and state governments to hoteliers and patrons are constantly searching for solutions.

It is because of this-ever present problem and a need for solutions, that new laws have been introduced to NSW state parliament this week. These laws gives police more power to prevent alcohol-related violence and anti-social behaviour, such as; police being able to direct intoxicated individuals away from public places such as pubs and clubs and also the possibility to charge them with drunk and disorderly conduct if they are resistant to police instructions.

NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell as well as the Illawarra police and hotel industry have welcomed the changes, but they all agreed that it was up to the individual to take responsibility for their actions in order to prevent this behaviour.

Lorenzo Pagnan, owner of Lorenzo's Diner in the Wollongong CBD, who is also a Wollongong Liquor Accord member, agrees with that statement.

"People should become more responsible for their actions. People in these situations (alcohol-related violence) say 'I was drunk at the time' and we say 'well how did you get drunk?'" Mr Pagnan said.

However Lance Barrie, research manager with the Centre of Health Initiatives, which is based at the University of Wollongong disagrees with that statement.

"I would 100 percent disagree with that statement. For any sort of anti-social culture to change, the environment needs to change first. That's how I see the best way forward to reducing this behaviour,"

“In order to create a better environment for patrons, the government needs to step in first.” Mr Barrie said.

The government are not the only institution stepping in, Australian and New Zealand police have been making hundreds of arrests over the weekend as part of Operation Unite, a two-day operation which targets intoxicated individuals who instigate or are a part of anti-social behaviour.

Lance Barrie believes that it takes more than one strategy to try and stop alcohol-related violence and anti-social behaviour.

“It’s hard to have one sort of strategy that is going to have an impact on anti-social behaviour because it is such a big issue and covers many different facets of health.”

Along with these new laws and increased police presence, Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) footage of alcohol-related violence in the Wollongong CBD was released to the public. Both Mr Pagnan and Mr Barrie agree that the shock value of this footage could help raise awareness and make the public re-think their actions.

“I don’t think people who are safe and asleep at home realise what their kids are out there doing. These kids belong to someone and a lot of parents would be mortified to see their kids behave in such an irresponsible and foolish manner, purely because they have had too much alcohol,”

“I think that they (the police) should show as much (CCTV footage) as they can. Sometimes the shock value makes people more aware of what is really going on and possibly lead them onto doing something about it.” Mr Pagnan said.

“It (releasing the CCTV footage to the media) did raise awareness. It was an effective way to bring it to the public agenda and it’s a social issue that everyone should care about.” Mr Barrie said.

Lucienne Dobbin, a second year nutrition & dietetics student at the University of Wollongong and a regular patron at various pubs and nightclubs in Wollongong, agrees that releasing this footage does raise awareness, however it might not be effective for the instigators of the violence.

“I don’t think it’s effective for the people, who start the fights, but for the people, who go out and just want to have fun, it might deter them from staying out very late or at least it might make them more cautious of how much alcohol they consume, so that they can try and avoid that situation.”

These practical methods and possible solutions are appearing to become more effective and popular over education, which is still being used today. However Mr Barrie believes that education on its own has shown to be ineffective.

“If you were to do any preventative or educational programs, they would have to be targeted at certain types of people and it would have to be a part of a larger strategy to address the issue. Education alone won’t be effective in changing the behaviours that need to be changed.”

Mr Pagnan believes that if any educational program were to be created, it would have to start with the older citizens and work down to the younger citizens.

“There are people out there who choose not to be educated and not hear the message. However if you were going to do an educational program, you would have to start at the older citizens and point out to them that their drinking habits and what they did in the past was wrong and now they’ve passed their habits on to their children and that they are doing things that are wrong,”

“You need to look at how people obtain and consume alcohol and try to work within that. People will always find a way to consume alcohol, no matter what and there needs to be a definite education, but it has to start with the older citizens and work down to the younger citizens.”

However, despite the violence and anti-social behaviour and all of the possible solutions in place, both educational and practical, Ms Dobbin believes that this would deter some people from going out on a Saturday night, but not everyone.

“I think the violence and behaviour would deter people to some degree, because it is all pretty scary, but I would still go out and just avoid the places where the fights are most likely to happen.”

And so the cycle continues on.