



PRESS RELEASE

HOW MANY AUSTRALIANS WILL BE COUNTING THEIR STANDARD DRINKS AT MIDNIGHT TONIGHT?

- EMBARGOED UNTIL 0100 AEDT WEDNESDAY 31 DECEMBER 2008 -

At the stroke of midnight tonight many Australians will be raising their glasses to bring in the New Year. Of those, how many will be taking the time to work out how many 'standard drinks' they have had through the evening?

A great deal of time and money is dedicated to informing Australians about this measure but Paul Dillon, Director of Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia (DARTA), doubts whether there will be many counting their drinks tonight, or any other night, and is calling for an immediate evaluation of the strategy.

"The standard drink is at the core of all of our education around alcohol yet we have never evaluated whether it is working or not," said Mr Dillon. "Some studies have shown that people have heard about standard drinks, but we do not know whether they understand the concept or if they use them effectively."

A 'standard drink' is any drink containing 10 grams of alcohol. One standard drink always contains the same amount of alcohol, regardless of the container size or alcohol type whether it be beer, wine or a spirit. It is basically a unit of measurement, i.e., metres measure distance, standard drinks measure a particular amount of alcohol consumed.

Instead of counting glasses or containers, drinkers are encouraged to count standard drinks as a way of keeping track of how much alcohol they consume. Counting standard drinks is believed to be a much more reliable measure of how much alcohol is consumed compared to counting glasses, bottles, or cans, as different containers contain varying amounts of alcohol. In Australia, the number of standard drinks in alcohol is always shown on the label of the container.

Mr Dillon says that the biggest problem is undoubtedly with younger people who tend to use a standard drink to 'drink up' rather than to use in a safer way.

"Standard drinks are an important part of alcohol education in schools around the country. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence would indicate that some teenagers use the concept, particularly the listing of the number of standard drinks on the alcohol container, to work out the drink that can get them drunk faster!"

As far as adults are concerned many Australians appear to use standard drinks in relation to driving, i.e., how many drinks can you drink to be under the limit? The great problem with this is that they are used by many people as 'rules', when in fact they are only 'guidelines' and in actual fact we should be promoting the message that drinking and driving simply don't mix, no matter how little you have drunk.

Although standard drinks are also used in healthy drinking guidelines, there is little evidence to suggest that many Australians actually follow these.

"At a time when the community is greatly concerned about alcohol problems it is vital that we evaluate whether the standard drink concept is being used effectively by Australians, both young and old," said Mr Dillon. "It would appear that the concept means very little to most Australians, apart from when they are considering driving. This has little or no relevance to the very young who either don't drive or are on their P plates and not allowed to drink at all when behind the wheel."

"If we are going to continue to use the concept we need to make it more relevant and ensure that it provides practical information that Australians can use in their everyday lives."

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