

WAVES LIVES

Alcohol abuse is leaving too many communities drowning in despair, as a parliamentary committee seeks solutions.

Story: **Emma O'Sullivan**

"People who are disillusioned, people who are disempowered, people who have a whole range of trauma in their lives are looking for a quick fix."

Patricia Miller once went to three funerals in the same week.

As the chief executive of the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, she has been observing the devastating effect alcohol has had on her people since the 1970s.

What she has witnessed is a human tragedy, fuelled by a substance that many Australians enjoy, and in moderation is supposed to bring enjoyment.

But that's far from the reality for Dr Miller's community, where 95 per cent of matters that come to her service are alcohol related and the rates of those in prison have soared.

"We have seen many of our friends buried far too early, hospitalised and incarcerated and between the two of us we have attended many funerals. We have even lost count," she says.

"These were people who passed away well before their time. It's nothing to attend a funeral three or four times a month."

Dr Miller, who has been working at the legal aid service for over three decades, was speaking at a recent public

hearing in Alice Springs as part of a national inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander alcohol misuse across all communities.

The inquiry is being conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, which will visit several other states in the coming months.


But at its first stop in the Northern Territory, committee members heard some staggering evidence about the damage being caused by alcohol abuse.

The Territory has long been known for its drinking culture, oft embraced across the population. So much so it was recently described by its Chief Minister Adam Giles as a "core social value" and "the way we live".

Tragically, as the committee heard, the Territory is also known as the "jaw-break" capital of the world. It is a place where road accidents are among the top three causes of drinking related deaths, the other two being liver disease and suicide.



Images: Indigenous artist David Hardy was commissioned to illustrate this About the House story



An unconscionable number of children are intellectually impaired for life due to alcohol.

Figures indicate that Territorians drink at a rate 1.5 times higher than the national average, consuming almost 13 litres a person per year. The cost of alcohol abuse has been put at over \$4,000 an adult, compared to just under \$1,000 elsewhere.

Alcohol addiction is ruining people's health, destroying families and denying children a future.

What is all the more disturbing is the disproportionate effect this abuse is having on just a third of the Territory's population, half of whom don't drink at all.

They are the Indigenous residents, and those who do drink are consuming at 1.7 times the national average. Their rates of death due to alcohol are eight times higher for men and 16 times higher for women than non-Indigenous people.

It's a cycle of addiction that has continued unbroken for decades as governments at the state and federal levels have tried to close the gap.

As policy makers struggle to achieve long-lasting progress, those on the frontline, such as Dr Miller, continue to help people who have reached a complete crisis-point.

Along with Dr Miller, representatives from alcohol advocacy groups, health organisations and local councils also came before the committee to outline what action they thought should be taken to stop the gap from widening.

Many were quick to point out that alcohol abuse was happening across all populations in the Territory, a fact committee chair Sharman Stone (Murray, Vic) readily acknowledges.

"We know that every Australian has to look very carefully at their alcohol consumption. We are a population that happens to have a very strong culture of alcohol use. But we are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander committee and we are focusing on Indigenous drinking matters right now," she says.

In order to tackle the problem, the committee is exploring what is causing and driving abuse, ways to best treat those addicted, and prevention and harm minimisation strategies.

But effective responses are difficult when the causes – a mixture of historical, social, cultural and economic issues – are well entrenched.

As Nicola Coulter of the Northern Territory Council of Social Services explains, many Indigenous families are dealing with a lot of hurt and disadvantage which has continued over several generations.

"People who are disillusioned, people who are disempowered, people who have a whole range of trauma in their lives are looking for a quick fix," she says.

And for many, having no hope in the future is a big factor, as chief executive of the Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services Jillian Smith points out.

"Hopelessness is a word that comes up frequently when you talk about the lives of people in some communities. Loss of hope and interest in the future is a very dismal place to be," she says.

"I think it will take a lot of work over generations perhaps to turn that around."

"Tonight around 700 to 750 children will not be sleeping in their homes across the Territory because those homes are not safe"

Well known musician and Alice Springs resident Ted Egan, who served as Administrator of the Northern Territory from 2003 to 2007, says it must be understood that many Aboriginals drink to get drunk.

"They were once forbidden alcohol. Now the mindset is you drink alcohol to get drunk and, by extension, aggressive. If that is not the outcome, you've wasted your money," he says.

Under these circumstances family life becomes dysfunctional, with the worst impacts hitting the most vulnerable of all – children – as Sharman Stone is all too aware.

"We've been given a lot of data that is quite shocking, in the number of assaults, the number of admissions in accident and emergency, in

comparison to non-Indigenous communities and the tragedy is that young children and babies are neglected," she says.

The effects on children who live with alcoholic parents are huge. They may be neglected, have poor health, are not attending school and live in unsafe environments where they are exposed to violence which has been brought on by alcohol abuse.

As they grow older they are themselves susceptible to alcohol addiction and run-ins with the law.

It's the job of NT Children's Commissioner Howard Bath to ensure the wellbeing of young children, a job he has been doing since 2008.

He says over three quarters of kids in out-of-home care are Indigenous. Those in youth detention are as high as 90 per cent.

In a recent study of children on child protection orders in the NT who had been neglected or abused, 86 per cent of these cases involved problematic parental alcohol use by one or both parents.

"Tonight around 700 to 750 children will not be sleeping in their homes across the Territory because those homes are not safe, and most of them are not safe because of parental alcohol use," he says.

And often those children's safety is compromised because their mothers also live in fear.

As Dr Bath explains, Aboriginal women in the NT make up 0.3 per cent of all Australian women, but they account for 14 per cent of all hospitalisations for assault Australia-

wide, with alcohol likely to be involved in two-thirds of the assaults.

Aboriginal mothers are therefore 48 times more likely to be hospitalised for assault than all Australian women.

"Children are growing up thinking this is normality, this is what life is about," Dr Bath says.

"The question has to be: how many lives does it take to get action on alcohol that will significantly change the pattern of what is happening? How many more mothers does it take to get battered and killed in this process before we get action to stop it?"

Dr Bath also points out that an "unconscionable number of children are intellectually impaired for life" due to alcohol. This is because of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a broad term used to cover a range of conditions a child is born with because of high exposure to alcohol in the womb. It is notoriously hard to diagnose and treat and has ramifications for life.

FASD is of great concern to Dr Bath and many of those who appeared before the committee. The issue was examined in depth by a parliamentary committee in 2011 — Sharman Stone was also a member of that committee. (see 'Lifelong sentence')

As children, families and communities continue their precarious existence, those advocating for solutions say too much focus is sometimes put on trying to fix things once the alcohol is consumed.

Instead, arguments have been put forward for measures which attack the causes of disadvantage, control supply, reduce demand and provide long-term support after rehabilitation in order to sustain sobriety.

In terms of regulation, communities in the Territory are subject to a mix of laws. For example, federal law bans alcohol in what is known as a prescribed area while Territory law provides the framework for the licensing of pubs and takeaway outlets.

Over the years, the NT government has administered a number of measures and programs to tackle abuse and anti-social behaviour. In some instances particular consumers have been banned from buying alcohol or are sent to mandatory treatment programs. Some public areas have restrictions on drinking. Other communities have their own voluntary plans or systems to manage alcohol supply and use.

Both in the Territory and nationally, debate continues and opinions vary over which measures have proved most effective. And concerns have also been raised that some recent measures involving mandatory rehabilitation are criminalising what is effectively an illness.

The National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) is among several voices which favour the

LIFELONG SENTENCE

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a term used to describe a range of conditions that a person has because they were exposed to alcohol in the womb. A person with FASD, which also includes Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, may be dealing with a physical or mental disability or behavioural and developmental issues.

However there are no national guidelines for screening and diagnosing what is a lifelong condition for those affected. There is also no cure and it is not officially classed as a disability.

Complicating matters further is the lack of clarity around how many Australians may have FASD, although it is estimated that the rate is up to two to three times higher in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Of particular concern to those who gave evidence to the Indigenous Affairs Committee is the connection of FASD with crime.

Dr Patricia Miller estimates that up to 60 per cent of people she sees charged with an alcohol related offence are affected by FASD.

"We suspect there is a strong link between FAS and FASD and contact with the criminal justice system here," she says. "There needs to be better access to assessment services and support services, and declaring FAS and FASD as a disability may assist."

Dr Howard Bath says children are being condemned to a lifetime of marginalisation and dependence.

"Their prospects for the future have been significantly harmed and many will be maltreated and end up in the mental health and juvenile justice systems," he says.

Shirley Lewis of the Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation says those getting involved with alcohol at a young age are probably coming from families already affected by FASD.

"They are running amok in the primary schools and they are not learning," she says. "Primary schools are meant to be the foundation for the rest of your kid's life, but they are not actually learning there."

However there are signs that some educational initiatives are having an impact. Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation chair LT says a project they have had running for several years has helped parents understand what is wrong with their children.

"Now that we have the education, we need support and help to keep it going and do research," she says.

The corporation's Trevor Sanders says early intervention measures must be developed to try and halt the generational impact.



introduction of volumetric taxation, which in simplified terms involves taxing the alcoholic content of a particular drink. NIDAC's Professor Dennis Gray says the option is appealing for several reasons.

"It can be applied nationwide by the federal government. It also has the appeal of taxing beverages with differential alcohol contents and different rates, so it is a much more efficient way to do it," he says.

Regulations aside, the committee also heard that more emphasis needs to be put on supporting those who are most impacted – children – such as improving their education and safety as well as support for better parenting.

Donna Ah Chee of the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress says authorities have to get in early.

"We know that there are key interventions that can work around parental support through home visitation as well

as child-focused support through educational day care," she says.

Trevor Sanders, of the Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation, points out that getting people out of overcrowded housing is crucial to ensuring the safety of families and especially children. If you can address that you can begin to address alcohol abuse and then domestic violence.

"The fact is in health care we are really the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. People are living in dangerous and poor environments. They come into either the emergency department or to our facility. They get treated, they get patched up, they go back to a poor environment and they come back," he says.

"To tell people in a household of 20 or 30 people not to drink, not to smoke, not to do whatever, you are wasting

your money. We really have to attack the social determinant if we are to make an impression.”

Dr Miller says more must be done in schools to educate young people about alcohol harm.

“I do not think everybody, especially in the Aboriginal community, knows that when you are pregnant and you drink it is going to create harm not only to you but to your unborn children,” she says.

“You have to physically go out and talk to schools and to communities and have a captive audience so that you can penetrate with your message.”

Similarly cultural perceptions and norms must also be tackled at the school level says Nicola Coulter of the Northern Territory Council of Social Services.

“At primary school events they serve alcohol. This is a cultural thing and this is what we are modelling to the next generation of people in this country,” she says.

As the inquiry heads to other states it will be hoping to hear more ideas about potential solutions and programs which

have worked at a local level. Chair Sharman Stone predicts the process may take 12 months.


“At the end we hope to have a set of recommendations which state and territory governments will embrace,” she says.

“We expect the federal government will embrace them so we can make things much more useful and provide a different future for people who are currently at very high risk levels.”


Many who have already aired their views, including musician Ted Egan, will be watching and waiting.

“We owe it to them to enable their rehabilitation,” he says. “They did not ask for the chaos that has invaded their lives.” ■

LINKS

 www.aph.gov.au/IndigenousAffairs

 IndigenousAffairs.reps@aph.gov.au

 (02) 6277 4559

INROADS

Long-term solutions to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people away from harmful alcohol use for good, to improve the prospects of communities as a whole, still remain elusive to policy makers.

However the House of Representatives Indigenous Affairs Committee has heard several examples of organisations and individuals persevering in the face of funding challenges and resourcing difficulties to secure inroads in their area.

Timothy Shaw of the Tangentyere Council (which looks after the town camps of Alice Springs) told the committee of a successful men's program he ran in Mt Isa from 2006.

Those in trouble from the law were referred from the courts to the program which helped connect them to elders who could assist with their problems. Around 1,000 men went through the program, with only five per cent landing back in jail.

“There were a lot of men who changed their life, they stopped drinking and moved on,” he says.

Now Mr Shaw is doing something similar in Tangentyere where elders from each camp are selected and meet three times a week.

They identify the problem drinkers in the community who could benefit from joining Mr Shaw's program.

“We do a bush trip and part of that bush trip is going out camping and sitting down with all the men, no grog, talking about issues in town,” he says.

“Once we work with them we find out what the issues are and the elder men can help start dealing with them”.

Also in Alice Springs the Drug and Alcohol Services Association is providing various treatment services focusing on harm minimisation.

With 36 staff who work from three sites in the town, the association has a sobering up shelter which provides an alternative to protective custody and an outreach program which offers residential treatment and aftercare.

Around 20 people a night end up in the sobering up facilities, according to its chief executive Margo McGregor. The clients are mostly Aboriginal and mostly men.

“The staff will monitor those people regularly during the course of the night to ensure their breathing is okay and to look at their risk,” she says.

“In the morning, once that person comes to, they might have another shower and they will have some breakfast.

“Then the staff including the outreach staff will come in and have a conversation with those people: ‘How are you? What do you want to do? Where are you going? This is the third time we've seen you here this week’.”

Ms McGregor says an effective harm minimisation framework involves a set of strategies involving various intervention, treatment and care options.

“And that gives people a level of information and education that will enable them to make informed decisions,” she says.