

Greeting

- Hello and thank you for inviting me to open this seminar today, and thank you to Sandra Harben who gave the welcome to country on behalf of Aboriginal people.
- Can I start by acknowledging the Nyoongar people who are the Traditional custodians on whose Land we meet.
- I would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past and present, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people here today.
- I am delighted to have the opportunity to say a few words at the opening of what promises to be a really interesting seminar, where young people can present their own views about alcohol, in their own voice, and I am particularly looking forward to hearing what they have to say.

Introduction

- In my work as the Minister for Mental Health, Disability Services and the Drug and Alcohol Office, I have become increasingly interested in the issues concerning young people and alcohol.
- In my roles as a mother and grandmother – my 18 year old granddaughter currently lives with me and my husband – I find myself living with the reality of these issues and how they affect the young people in my family.

Our Alcohol Culture

- I am very aware of the alcohol 'culture' we find ourselves in, that has been developing in recent decades.
- We live in a market-based economy and know that consumption of any commodity is driven by a range of factors. Four of these are:
 - **Price** - alcohol obeys the economic principles of price elasticity and if it can be delivered cheaper then sales go up;
 - **Promotion** - marketing practices are not only designed to create expectations about the experience that consuming the product will bring but also to improve sales of the product or service;
 - **Place** – leading the way in product placement a well known cola very deliberately made sure that their product was available anywhere and anytime; and finally
 - **Product** - it's important to provide a range of products that are appealing and palatable to the range of consumer palates out there in the potential marketplace.
- We need to ask ourselves: 'is alcohol an ordinary commodity? Is it desirable for consumption to increase and what impact does this have on young people?'
- This has partly been driven by the increased availability of alcohol, and in our ability to access it.

- There are more places you can buy alcohol than ever before (including over the internet), with shops open on more days of the week, for longer hours.
- But also alcohol is relatively cheap in relation to the amount of disposable income people have, and in comparison to other beverages.
- There's more variety than ever before – and this is a significant issue for young people who have alcohol specially made to appeal to their tastes, and targeted at them and their activities.
- The marketing and promotion of these products is all pervasive, and even creeps into settings like schools where young people are exposed to alcohol and alcohol promotion, even if it is in an indirect way.
- Young people often get the blame for lots of things, including their alcohol use.
- But it is important to recognize that a young person's drinking is a reflection of what they see, learn and hear is acceptable in the adult world around them.
- If young people are watching adults, or even older siblings drinking alcohol until they are drunk, it is not surprising to see them mirroring this behavior.
- Social norms, expectations and societal permission, sometimes called permissiveness, support this type of alcohol use.
- This means people with a view different to the norm – end up getting drowned out by the majority who accept harmful drinking.

- It is a sad state indeed when drunkenness is seen as normal behaviour and something that everybody does.

So what is the problem?

- In Australia, alcohol use is second only to tobacco as the leading cause of death and hospitalization.
- Unlike tobacco however – the number of people ending up in hospital because of alcohol is increasing - this includes:
 - people involved in traffic accidents and drink driving,
 - people who have suffered injuries in a fight, like glassing or king hits
 - people who have been swimming at the beach or off the boat and drowned
 - or one of the many other incidents that occur regularly when people are drunk.
- There are also many other conditions that are alcohol-caused but often go unrecognised. For example, some 10% of all breast cancer is alcohol-caused.
- Alcohol use also contributes to the incidence of other cancers, stroke, liver disease, cardio-vascular disease, mental health conditions and other chronic diseases too numerous to mention here today.
- Compared with Australians generally, Western Australians drink alcohol at a higher risk of both short and long term harm.
- This is reflected in the current research about our young people with the 2008 Australian Secondary Schools Alcohol and Drug

Survey showing 50% of 17 year olds reporting consuming alcohol in the last week, and more than 10% by the age of 12.

- This survey also shows that young people seem to be drinking less frequently, but when they do, they drink significantly more – which of course causes more harm.
- Other factors that give us increasing cause for concern include emerging evidence about:
 - the impact of alcohol on a young person’s developing brain,
 - the impact of early initiation on dependence – in other words the younger people start drinking the more likely they are later in life to experience problems with alcohol dependence,
 - and the increase in alcohol-related violence, anti-social behaviour and family and relationship breakdown- we only need to read the paper or watch the news to see this happening.
- In my role as Disability Services Minister I have met a number of young people whose disabilities were the result of an alcohol related accident, and the same is true in the Mental Health area.
- The link between alcohol and other drug use and mental health issues is significant, and further complicates the already difficult path people with these conditions and their families must tread on their way to wellness.

- I visited the specialist Drug and Alcohol Youth Service, or DAYS, last week and met with a number of young people receiving treatment for their alcohol and drug issues.
- I particularly remember meeting a 15 year old young lady who had just entered detox for alcohol related issues, including the consumption of more than two litres of cask wine per day.
- It is important that young people have access to specialized treatment services like DAYS, but I think we would all agree it would be far better to prevent these problems occurring in the first place.

Well what are we doing?

- So it is vitally important that we ask ourselves what we can do as individuals, and as a community, to address this drinking culture that we are raising our children in.
- It is important for government to provide leadership in this area, and the recently launched Drug and Alcohol Interagency Framework outlines the way government, non-government and community organisations need to work together, towards a positive outcome over the next 5 years.
- Children and young people are acknowledged in the Framework, as one of the priority groups who experience greater impacts from alcohol and other drug use, and therefore require more support.
- In relation to young people the Framework takes a prevention first approach.

- This means preventing harmful alcohol use through a range of initiatives aimed at individuals, families and communities like:
 - Community awareness and public education campaigns
 - Controlling access to and the availability of alcohol
 - Continuing work on the alcohol and drug component of the school curriculum, and training for teachers
 - Promoting events and activities that young people enjoy which prevent and delay alcohol use,
 - And also encouraging young people to participate in developing government's responses to the issues they are facing – and that's exactly what we are doing today.
- Alcohol-caused disorders are preventable and pose risks to young people right now, and in the absence of action, for generations to come.
- That is why it is encouraging to see so many people here wanting to make a difference regarding this important issue.
- Everyone in the community plays a part in telling the story to our children - alcohol and young people is a bad mix.
- The National Drinking Guidelines tell us that it is **not** ok to drink before 18 years of age and it is **not** ok to drink to intoxication.
- Unfortunately we know young people are accessing their alcohol primarily from their parents - so we particularly need to work on getting the message out to parents that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption for children under 18 years of age and to provide support for them to set consistent and clear

parameters and expectations for their children regarding alcohol use.

Strategies and solutions

- Supporting parents with information and action they can take to delay alcohol use among young people is part of the solution, alongside current efforts to try and change the drinking culture.
- Our response has to be a comprehensive approach and, as is often the case, when a cultural change is needed, there is no silver bullet, and change won't occur overnight.
- It took a long-time to turn around tobacco use in our community and similarly turning around harmful alcohol consumption will not be achieved today.
- But our efforts can be further reinforced as a result of today.
- I believe we need more:
 - sustained community education and information,
 - more alternative activities for young people,
 - we need to try and create more environments where alcohol and children are separated, so they have a break from being exposed to alcohol promotion and use.
 - we also need more school alcohol and other drug education
 - and lastly an alcohol free school environment – separating alcohol from the school environment would help change

the drinking culture and delay young people's initiation to alcohol.

Concluding remarks

- But that's enough from me though – I am really interested in what the young people here have to say.
- We need your voices to guide our leadership, and we need your Commissioner to bring us all together to discuss important issues that matter to you.
- I understand to be a good politician you need to be a good listener, so I'm keen to hear, and congratulations on participating in such a worthwhile event.
- I bet there's some budding politicians and leaders among you who will one day take over our role, and hopefully together today we will have made a little difference to the lives of young people.
- Thank you again for inviting me along to hear what you have got to say.

ENDS