Is Alcohol Policy in Ireland Protective?

Alcohol Policy in Ireland has come under criticism from the IMO and many other agencies who claim that the Government does not do enough to limit the damage done to our society by alcohol. The recent budget recommendations to decrease the price of alcohol add fuel to the debate. The Irish Medical Organisation has criticised the Governments budget proposal to reduce excise duty on all types of alcohol. Professor Joe Barry pointed out that the Council of the European Union asked all member States to consider pricing policy when addressing alcohol related harm. This budget, unfortunately, goes in the opposite direction. There is ample evidence of a significant problem developing with regard to the extent of underage drinking in Ireland. The 1999 international ESPAD report (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) showed that Irish children aged 16 years are among the highest alcohol abusers in Europe in terms of binge drinking and drunkenness. One in three were regular binge drinkers and one in four reported being drunk 10 or more times in the last year. Irish 15 year olds were in joint 3rd place, on a par with the Isle of Man. Only Denmark (60%) and The Netherlands (58%) reported a higher proportion of 15 year old binge drinkers.

A more recent Health Behavior in School Children (HBSC) survey reported that in the 15-17 age group, about half of the boys and girls were regular drinkers and drunkenness was also prevalent (60% boys, 56% girls). A report by Dr. Ann Hope (HSE) on consumption of alcohol between 1996 and 2006 revealed that over that period the sale of alcohol in Ireland has increased in all beverage categories. A recent report by the Office of Tobacco Control (2006) revealed that Irish 16-17 year olds spend 20.99 per week on alcohol. This amounts to an illegal alcohol market of 145m in this country and as a society we seem to be accepting this as normal.

Research over the last decade has also shown that alcohol affects an adolescent brain differently from an adult brain. Damage from alcohol use during adolescence can be long term and irreversible. Therefore, it is critically important to delay the age of onset of drinking by young people, as recommended by the WHO.

The Strategic Taskforce on Alcohol was set up in 2002 to make recommendations on specific, evidence-based measures to government to prevent and reduce alcohol related harm. These have been largely ignored. In June 2004 the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health & Children published a report which made far reaching recommendations: Again, no Government action. Public Health Consultant Dr Joe Barry has said 'Appears the alcohol issue has disappeared off the Governments agenda and the powerful Drinks Industry view holds more sway in Government circles than the Strategic Taskforce or the Joint Oireachtas Committee. MEAS (Mature Enjoyment of Alcohol in Society) was established in 2002 to promote social responsibility among producers, marketers, distributors and retailers of alcohol in Ireland in partnership with the government. One of MEAS initiatives was the Responsible Sale of Alcohol programme which helps license holders to develop policies and procedures about the safe serving of alcohol.

MEAS has, however, come in for criticism from the IMO who claim that the globalised alcohol industry is presenting itself as socially responsible through a network of industry controlled 'social action' organisations. As they say: 'The Irish organisation is called MEAS, in practice, MEAS is about Minimising Effective Action by the State'.