

Rivers of grog could run dry

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THE Expert Advisory Panel that reviewed the NT's alcohol policies and legislation is to be congratulated on a great job.

It's also fantastic to see the Gunner Government's commitment to leading the country with the proposed reforms.

The extensive evidencebased report, overseen by former chief justice Trevor Riley, is a great catalyst for altering the Territory's grog culture.

It's especially heartening to see the recommendation for a minimum unit or "floor" price on takeaway alcohol. Of the many positive changes that will come about, this is perhaps the most effective.

As the Riley Review says: "A range of studies have convincingly demonstrated that pricing measures are an effective tool available to government to reduce harm associated with alcohol consumption".

Unfortunately, even in the face of the evidence, some, including former Labor minister Chris Burns (NT News, 21/10/17 and 23/10/17), can't or won't grasp how it works.

How does it work? A standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol.

A minimum price per standard drink is set.

The People's Alcohol Action Coalition proposes it be at the existing price of fullstrength beer. No alcohol would be sold below this price.

The price of full-strength beer stays the same, but beer becomes the cheapest drink.

It is well established that problem drinkers, and especially those on low incomes, largely go for the cheapest drink. They will still drink, but won't be able to afford as much, will cause less harm to themselves and others, and cost the community less both in dollars and disruption.

The effect of pricing on such drinkers became clear during the Liquor Supply Trials in Alice Springs in 2002-2003.

Fortified cask wine became the cheapest product when the Liquor Commission failed to include it in the restrictions.

Consumption of pure alcohol, mostly in the form of port, increased a thousand per cent, with harmful consequences. Further restrictions in Alice Springs in 2006 effectively doubled the minimum price from 25 to 50 cents.

This saw consumption fall by 18 per cent, reduced hospital admissions for Aboriginal women for assault, and lowered alcohol-related crime rates by 12 per cent, according to an independent evaluation by the Menzies School of Health Research.

A 10 per cent increase in the minimum price has seen a reduction in consumption of more than eight per cent in Saskatchewan, Canada, and mortality caused by alcohol down by nearly a third in British Columbia. The public health benefit is clear and real.

A minimum price won't affect the vast majority of responsible, moderate drinkers because they don't drink the really cheap stuff.

Beer drinkers will find that there are 31.2 standard drinks in a slab of VB, at a total cost of \$46.80. Slabs of VB are almost always above this price. The cost of the cheapest wines will rise, but the fact is that it's the harmful drinkers who buy almost all of the cheapest wine.

There will not be a windfall for retailers because they cannot sell cheap grog at grossly inflated prices when consumers can and will buy better quality alcohol at the same price. Their customers are not fools.

Will a floor price stop alcoholics drinking? Of course not.

Will it prevent them spending every available cent they have on grog? No, it won't.

But, with the money they do have, they won't be able to buy or drink as much, or do as much harm.

As the Chief Minister says, it's time to tear up the Liquor Act and start again.

The Australian Hotels Association supports most of the recommendations. It's worth checking them out.

Michael Gunner, Natasha Fyles and their colleagues must continue to lead on the alcohol issue. It's not just about the drinkers, but life for all of us. The debate must be based on evidence and data, not populist misunderstandings about a floor price.

Interestingly, the Productivity Commission has just released its latest report on what Australia needs to do to improve productivity over the next five years. It concludes that if we don't have a federal volumetric alcohol tax, then we must have a floor price.

Dr John Boffa is a spokesman for PAAC and former NT Australian of the Year.

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Caption Text:

The once ubiquitous Todd River green cans could be history, if new booze review recommendations are implemented

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