



SELECT COMMITTEE ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE
IN THE COMMUNITY

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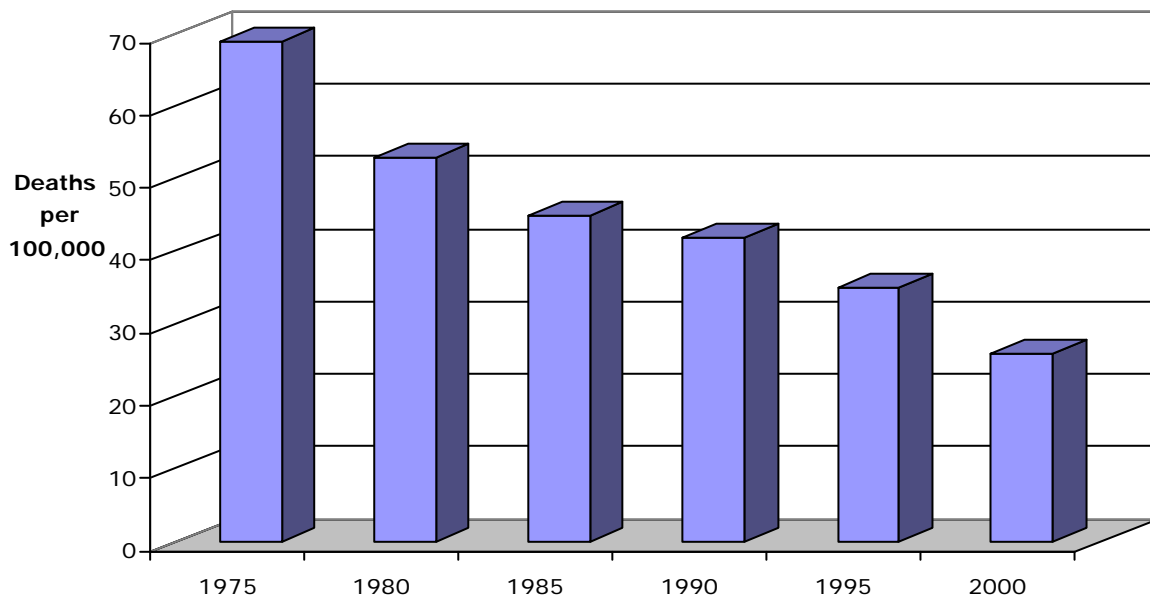
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Alcohol and Driving

A recent NT News report (April 2002) highlighted the rate of road fatalities in the Northern Territory. The study to which the report refers showed the Territory has the highest road death rate per 100,000 population in the OECD. Territory road fatalities are three times the national average. Given that the rate of alcohol consumption in the Northern Territory is fifty percent more than the national average and there is a well-established connection between blood alcohol level and fatal accidents, the Territory road toll is consistent with research findings.

While the fatality rates remain unacceptable, there have been significant decreases in these rates over the past twenty-five years. The efforts and strategies of the past have had a positive effect on reducing road trauma including random breath testing, road safety education, increased penalties, alcohol education, alternative transport options, drink driver education, vehicle design and seat belt enforcement. Community attitudes to alcohol and driving appear to have changed with a broader understanding and acceptance of the measures put in place to address this issue.

Road Fatality Rates at Five Year Intervals for the NT



The NT Drink Driver Education Program

Amity Community Services was involved in the implementation of the Northern Territory Drink Driver Education Program in 1994 and continues to co-ordinate the Program across the Territory. The Program consists of delivery of an approved drink driver education course in the NT, data collection, community education and liaison with other sectors.

The Course

The Northern Territory (NT) Course in Drink Driver Education (DDE) consists of two nationally accredited education modules. There is a mainstream version for delivery to the broader NT community and a customised version for delivery to the Aboriginal community. Since 1995, successful completion of the course has been a relicensing requirement of the NT Registrar of Motor Vehicles after licence cancellation following a drink driving offence.

The course aims to provide course participants with information and skills to enable them to make informed decisions regarding their own future drink driving behaviour. The course is designed in a competency-based format in which participants are assessed using a standardised set of competency requirements. Course participants are issued with a Statement of Attainment upon successful completion of the course.

The Modules

The first module consists of topics related to the short term effects of alcohol and alternative behavioural strategies. Module 1 consists of 5x2 hour sessions. Successful completion of Module 1 is a relicensing requirement for first-time drink drive offenders with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) less than .15% at the time of their offence.

The second module covers topics associated with the long term effects of alcohol and alternative drinking strategies. Module 2 consists of 2x2 hour sessions. Successful completion of both Module 1 and Module 2 is a relicensing requirement for drink drive offenders with a BAC level of .15% and over, and/or more than one drink driving offence or who have refused/failed to supply a sample.

Legislative History

Laws pertaining to drink driving have been on the NT statutes since 1923. In 1989, the NT Legislative Assembly formed the Sessional Committee on the Use and Abuse of Alcohol by the Community to inquire into, report on and make recommendations about various aspects of alcohol consumption in the NT. At this time 53% of road fatalities in the NT were alcohol-related. The Sessional Committee found that the average blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of people who tested positive from 1986 to 1989 was 0.18%.

In 1991, the Sessional Committee published 41 recommendations arising from the inquiry, with 6 recommendations focusing on penalties for drink driving. Two of these 6 recommendations are directly linked to the legislative changes that followed. They were:

(i) that a first conviction for drink driving at a blood alcohol level of below 0.15% should carry with it a requirement to undertake an education program on alcohol, and to satisfy an examiner that the information has been retained prior to a licence being re-issued.

and (ii) that

(a) second and subsequent drink driving offenders

(b) those with a blood alcohol concentration of 0.15% or over, and

(c) persons refusing a blood alcohol test

have their licences suspended immediately upon apprehension, and upon conviction be required to successfully undertake an appropriate program or treatment at their own cost before their licences will be reinstated.

(Sessional Committee, 1991:71)

The DDE modules were written and implemented in response to these changes.

Since 1991 significant changes to drink driving laws have occurred. In 1994, the NT saw the introduction of traffic infringement notices for driving with .05%-.08% BAC as well as immediate licence cancellation for driving with a BAC of .15% and above, repeat offending or refusing to breath test. Then, in 1995, the relicensing requirement for drink drive offenders to successfully complete an education/intervention program was introduced (Living with Alcohol Program/NT Road Safety Council Information Pamphlet).

Relicensing Requirement

Successful completion of the DDE course is a relicensing requirement under the NT Motor Vehicles Act, not a sentencing option. It is administered by the NT Motor Vehicle Registry (MVR), and is mandatory for all drivers choosing to relicense following licence cancellation as a result of a drink drive offence. This eliminates the option of circumventing the intervention, other than by not relicensing. The effectiveness of administrative sanctions has support from other sectors of the traffic safety community.

Customised Version

Aboriginal people account for one quarter of the NT's population and there is evidence that Aborigines are over-represented in the number of fatal road crashes (NT Road Safety Council, 1998). The mainstream DDE course has been customised to incorporate important cultural and social factors to decrease barriers to participation by Aborigines in urban and remote areas, and was developed in consultation with indigenous people across the NT. While key competencies and learning outcomes in the customised version remain the same as the mainstream version, methods of delivery and assessment vary to suit cultural norms.

User Pays

The NT DDE course is delivered on a user-pays basis. The Sessional Committee explicitly recommended that attendance by individuals to 'an appropriate program or required treatment' should be at no extra cost to the community and that payment be up front. Fees are set on a cost-recovery basis enabling training organisations to cover delivery costs in both urban and remote settings.

Participants Feedback

At the end of each course delivered at Amity Community Services the participants are asked to complete a survey. It is rare for individuals not to provide this feedback. 93% of participants report that the course was useful to very useful and only 2% indicating that participation was not at useful.

When asked what was most useful, "health aspects", "standard drinks" and "blood alcohol concentration levels" are most often singled out. Participants often comment on the survey that that the course should be made mandatory for all licence applicants and be included in high school based driver training.

Evaluation

The aim of the NT DDE course is to reduce the drink driving reoffending rate. In 1998, a study was conducted by Amity to identify the reoffending rate of NT DDE participants. This initial examination indicated a reoffending rate of 12.8% over the two years following the 1995/96 period selected for the study. The study indicated a higher percentage of reoffending occurring in groups with high BAC's and multiple offending history compared to groups of first offenders with lower BAC's. This could be a reflection of the position which alcohol maintains in the lifestyle of those required to complete both modules. The report from the study stated that before this baseline figure can be used as a measure as to whether the course has achieved its aim, pre-course (pre-1995) reoffending rates need to be identified and other influences need to be examined in terms of their impact on reoffending rates.

Difficulties

Difficulties associated with the NT DDE Program have arisen in a number of areas. Initially, information about relicensing requirements and availability of courses led to frustration on the part of course participants. This exacerbated any resentment felt about the mandatory nature of the new relicensing requirements. Another difficulty was that while the main urban centres were catered for in terms of course delivery, large areas of the NT were not serviced. Small numbers of potential participants spread over large distances was an obstacle to cost-effective delivery in remote areas. This was addressed by recruiting existing registered training organisations already providing adult education and training in remote areas. Another issue has been the difficulty in identifying replacement course providers when registered training organisations withdraw from particular locations.

Concerns about inconsistencies in delivery by course providers such as assessments undertaken and length of time allowed for sessions led to a quality assurance investigation. Discussions with individual course providers were held regarding the identified inconsistencies.

Other difficulties for the Program:

- lack of ongoing program evaluation
- inconsistent delivery jeopardises evaluation
- a rapid decline in quality and/or frequency of data collection by other sectors in the NT, eg Transport & Works, Police. This type of data is updated in the DDE course content and is vital to credibility and relevance to course participants
- barriers to participant access to Course because of fees/course costs, infrequency of delivery in some areas
- lack of funding to enable effective and consistent course monitoring by Program Co-ordinator

Course Statistics

Since 1995, the NT DDE Program has had 5300 enrolled participants, with 5020 participants successfully completing the modules.

There are currently 13 registered training organizations in the NT with approval to conduct the Course. These organizations have 20 permanent providers in various communities, with more locations serviced by visiting registered training organizations.

For *course participant demographic data* see Course Demographics, pg 6.

Discussion

Media reports continue to highlight the issue of extremely high blood alcohol concentrations amongst arrested drink drivers in the NT. Other jurisdictions have also noted that many countermeasures against drink driving are effective with the occasional opportunistic drink driver but the hard core are almost impervious to current measures. These jurisdictions are exploring the introduction of other options such as alcohol-ignition interlocks.

It is notable that efforts to address and reduce drink driving in the NT community now occur in an environment more conducive to responsible drinking and drink driving strategies. Support from government, business and commercial sector, driver groups and the community at large include increased media campaigns during festive/holiday periods, subsidised transport at main events such as New Years Eve, V8 Supercars and Darwin Cup, Sober Bob campaigns, and 'tow your vehicle home' initiatives. Specific support towards community education campaigns has come from the Ntsafe Grant Initiative, Australian Hotels Association (NT), Liquor Stores Association NT and Woolworths.

However, to enable a co-ordinated strategic approach to drink driving and road safety in general, it is important that data collection remains accurate, consistent and transparent. This provides any future planning and programming with an overview of the issue that includes high risk areas, trends and outcomes. A report published by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (formerly the Federal Office of Road Safety), which tables the percentage of drivers and motorcycle riders *involved* in fatal crashes in 1998 by State/Territory who were tested for alcohol, indicates that the NT had not obtained data on or had not tested more than 50% of this group compared with an average rate of 72% tested in other jurisdictions. The report points out that this greatly reduces the ability to monitor the effectiveness of drink driving countermeasures. Amity also has had difficulty in obtaining recent data such as rates of random breath testing conducted in the NT and conclusive data on alcohol-related crashes/fatalities on Territory roads.

While at times there appears to be a co-ordinated intersectoral approach amongst stakeholders (ie health, police, road safety, insurance sector, liquor industry, events co-ordinators and community organizations) to the issue of drink driving, the majority of responses tend to be in isolation from the larger picture and may, therefore, not benefit from a concerted, targeted, strategically planned approach. For example, the NT Police puts in significant resources into road blitzes and breath testing however this enforcement is not strategically underpinned by countermeasures delivered by other sectors, eg community education, entertainment venue participation and media campaigns throughout the year.

Course Demographics

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