

Embargoed until 12:01am Friday 14 May 2021

Growing concerns for Victorians seeking help for alcohol use

14 May 2021: A new survey by the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) has found that 70% of alcohol and other drug (AOD) services reported more people are seeking help for alcohol use since the pandemic began in Australia.

AOD services - which provide vital support to people experiencing harms associated with alcohol and other drugs - were asked if they had noticed an increase or decrease of alcohol as a drug of concern for clients, since March 2020.

Between December 2020 and January 2021, VAADA surveyed 38 AOD service agencies across Victoria. The survey found 70% of Victorian services reported an increase in alcohol as a drug of concern for clients, including nearly a quarter of services who said alcohol featured 'a lot more'.

Sam Biondo, Executive Officer of VAADA, said the survey confirms what VAADA has been hearing from services throughout 2020.

"Alcohol and other drug services have told us that presentations involving alcohol have been increasing during COVID-19, which this survey confirms.

"Not only have the number of people dealing with alcohol issues increased, but we have also consistently heard from services that there is a greater level of severity among those presenting with alcohol issues.

"We have also been consistently hearing that people new to treatment are seeking help, often mums and dads, following increased alcohol consumption during the restrictions.

"The adverse circumstances generated by COVID-19 combined with an opportunistic alcohol industry has resulted in a surge in people desperate for help with alcohol dependency.

Mr Biondo said that what we are seeing is sadly expected, when you consider the evidence of natural disasters and alcohol use. For example, following Black Saturday in Victoria, alcohol use by people residing in affected areas was 1.4 times higher than other regions.ⁱ Similar findings were made following the Queensland floods, where those in flood-affected areas were 5.2 times more likely to increase alcohol consumption.ⁱⁱ

"A potential increase in people seeking help for alcohol problems, either their own or a family member, is something that will put huge strain on our already stretched AOD services in Victoria. We need to ensure that services are adequately funded to deal with this demand. We also need to be doing all we can to prevent increases in risky alcohol use and harm." said Mr Biondo.

Caterina Giorgi, CEO of the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), said the Victorian Government has the opportunity to introduce measures to prevent alcohol harm through their review of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998. The review is due to conclude this year.

“Now more than ever, we need to be focusing on the health and wellbeing of our families and communities. The Victorian Government has the opportunity to introduce measures that would reduce the hidden harms from alcohol use including alcohol use disorders, family violence and chronic diseases,”

“This includes measures to ensure that alcohol companies pushing alcohol into people’s homes through online sales and delivery are meeting community standards.” Ms Giorgi said.

Sam Biondo, EO Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association is available for interview.

Caterina Giorgi, CEO Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education is available for interview.

Detailed survey results

- 27% of services said alcohol featured ‘a lot more’ as a drug of concern for clients
- 43% of services said alcohol featured ‘a bit more’ as a drug of concern for clients
- 22% said alcohol’s prevalence as a drug of concern remained the same
- One agency reported a decrease in alcohol as a drug of concern for clients

About VAADA and FARE

- The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association Inc. (VAADA) is a peak organisation, which aims to reduce the harms associated with alcohol and other drug use within the Victorian community
- The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is the leading not-for-profit organisation working towards an Australia free from alcohol harms

Media contact

Mike Dolan

mike.dolan@londonagency.com.au

0474 909 471

ⁱ Deloitte Access Economics 2016. The Economic Cost of the Social Impact of Natural Disasters. <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/assets/documents/Report%20-%20Social%20costs/Report%20-%20The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20social%20impact%20of%20natural%20disasters.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Turner et al 2013. Impact of the 2011 Queensland Floods on the use of Tobacco, Alcohol and Medication. 37 (4).