

Drunken youths flood into hospital

By ANNA CHALMERS - The Dominion Post | Friday, 11 April 2008

A six-fold increase in the number of drunken youths admitted to Wellington Hospital has forced doctors to become alcohol counsellors.

New figures show up to 600 patients under 20 years were admitted to the hospital's emergency department in the past year for intoxication or alcohol-related injuries. Hospital emergency medicine specialist Paul Quigley said it was a "six-fold blowout" on the 100 cases previously calculated.

Young females, particularly those aged 14 or 15, were leading the increase and, if current rates continued, would account for 60 per cent of all alcohol admissions under 20 by the end of the year, Dr Quigley said.

"The common perception is that being smashed is a male-dominated activity, but we are now seeing more young women than men presenting with severe intoxication."

Drinking admissions for under-20s at Wellington Hospital now account for 40 per cent of all alcohol-related cases. The rest are evenly spread among age groups.

Children as young as 11 had needed alcohol-related treatment, he said. Instances such as a 13-year-old girl who was admitted six times led to Child, Youth and Family being notified.

Dr Quigley presented the figures at an Alcohol Advisory Council conference in Nelson yesterday. They are based on admission rates during the past four years.

Unlike previous data, which only counted instances where alcohol was the primary cause of admission, the new study also included alcohol-related injuries, such as facial injuries, concussion and fractured hands - dramatically increasing the tally.

In an attempt to curb rates, staff had introduced a programme, called "brief intervention", whereby youngsters were spoken to by a doctor or nurse about their injury and alcohol use. They were then given information on the dangers of heavy drinking, and received a follow-up phone call from drug and alcohol services.

"We've initially focused on ones that come in unconscious."

But the department now planned to extend the scheme to all young people with serious alcohol injuries.

Dr Quigley also hoped it would be adopted nationwide. Overseas data linked the intervention programme to a drop in alcohol consumption by an average of four drinks a session, he said. Those admitted usually had 10 drinks or more.

Youth drug and alcohol counselling service WellTrust has welcomed the scheme.

Executive officer Murray Trenberth said alcohol was a major issue for the trust's clients aged 16 to 18. Females with alcohol problems had jumped from 33 per cent to 45 per cent of Welltrust's clients in the past few years, he said.

"These kids aren't alcoholics. The earlier you can intervene the easier it is to change that."

The union representing senior doctors, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, said it supported such programmes, but emergency department staffing needed to be considered.

"It may be one of the challenges are the sorts of patients that come in half-cut are coming in at the busiest time as well," executive director Ian Powell said.

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