

Informing and engaging the community

Josh Elliott

Good morning co-chairs, honourable members of parliament, distinguished guests and fellow youth delegates.

Before we begin, Emily and I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, the traditional owners of this land.

Over the past few days, we have heard many issues relating to harm arising from alcohol abuse, and some ideas for strategies to combat and prevent this harm.

It's now time to make the community more aware of the real dangers of alcohol abuse. This means informing the wider society - parents and carers, children, school teachers and role models - of the problems associated with the irresponsible consumption of alcohol. They need to understand:

- Why young people are drinking
- What could be done to encourage safe drinking and hence, the health of the youth

- Where can they go to receive assistance for themselves, their family and their children

Alcohol education needs to start at a much earlier age: for children, this needs to be when they are in primary school, because it's easier to tell young kids what's good to do, than tell teenagers what's bad.

Parents and carers need to adopt the duty of role models for their children from a small age. This is not something that comes easy, but parents need to make the effort and the commitment for their child.

Adults must have open and honest conversations with their children about alcohol. They must try and make their children aware of the consequences associated with binge drinking.

We also recognise that education is most effective when it consists of community education, regulation and services.

Adults need to be able to recognise symptoms of alcohol abuse, which should subsequently lead to the best possible solution for all involved.

Authorities need to understand that condemning the bottle is not a solution, but rather in some cases encourages young people to drink more. This is seen as a form of rebellion.

Adults need to provide us with information about places we can turn to if we have a problem relating to alcohol and need to communicate the social as well as the physical harms that alcohol can do to a person.

Emily Andrijic

Adults, including parents, guardians and other supportive figures need to assist young people in seeking help if they have an issue concerning alcohol misuse and abuse. For example, school excursions to a local health centre where we can meet the counsellors face-to-face and establish

relationships with them, would greatly help so that when we are faced with alcohol related issues we have an available support service that we have already been introduced to and are familiar with.

Interactive learning is a key element in the education of young people. It is required in order for us to take an interest in and remember what we are being educated upon. Communicating to young people through this method is the best way and the most effective in relating to and interesting youth. Give us real-life stories from the horse's mouth. For example, take us to visit an alcohol rehabilitation centre, where we can communicate, listen to and interact with other young people there. Their first-hand experiences mean more to us than reading facts about alcohol such as:

“Alcohol is a colourless chemical liquid which is produced when the sugars in fruits and grain ferment.”

Boring!!

But wait, it gets better:

“Ethanol happens to be the only non-prescription, euphoria-producing drug that is legal in our society.”

Honestly, would you, as a 15-year-old, sit there for an hour and absorb this information? I know I wouldn't! And would this then affect what you drink on Saturday night? I don't think so!

This interactive learning also applies to parents, guardians and other people who are influential in our lives. Listening to stories from other parents, including their experiences about their children that have had, or still have a problem with alcohol is one of the best ways to get the message across.

An effective alcohol education program requires having better trained and more accessible counsellors who can relate to young people. These people need not necessarily be part of the school system, but should have enough knowledge about

whatever drug a young person is putting in their body and the problems it may cause on physical, mental and social levels.

Confidentiality is a key factor for young people when seeking professional help. The people who we turn to for help need to understand and respect this – if we can't trust that what we say to them won't be repeated, then we won't ask for help. This is a huge issue for many young people in rural areas, where many have stated they would not visit a counsellor or medical service to discuss their issues concerning alcohol, as there is a strong possibility that the whole town could find out, causing public embarrassment to both themselves and their family.

Children with parents suffering from alcoholism have mentioned that having access to support services designed specifically for them, like Alateen and Holyoake really helps. They said that they would like to see more services like these available to children and young people so that they have

someone to turn to when they require help or if they have any issues that are troubling them.

Josh Elliott

At the Young People and Alcohol Forum held on Monday, we came up with several resolutions about effectively informing and engaging the community:

One of the ideas that arose was to introduce a dollar-for-dollar program, which for every dollar spent by liquor companies on advertising or sponsorship; they must spend another dollar on harm minimisation programs.

Some of the young people also felt that a Mandatory Code-of-Practice in terms of advertising should be introduced. As we have heard there is currently a voluntary code, but it is clearly ineffective. A mandatory code would mean that these companies were more restricted in the promoting of alcohol and would also mean that the ads would not be able to be targeted.

There is also the idea of creating an advisory group or “action team” of young people to advise the three education systems in NSW, the police, community representatives and other young people about ways to reduce the harm caused by alcohol abuse.

We believe that this is a practical suggestion to a serious problem. Strategies aimed at young people aren't going to be effective if the target audience they are designed for aren't involved in the decision-making and implementation process.

Likewise, the recommendations from this Summit to reduce alcohol-related harm amongst young people are not going to be effective unless our voices and ideas are listened to and we are included in all future decisions which affect us.

It is imperative that we create age-appropriate education about the risks of alcohol for primary school aged kids - before they start drinking.

We can do this through educating children at an earlier age and using programs such as “Happy Healthy Harold” to show the young kids that it is not cool to be 14 and drink so much alcohol that you are sick, or be so drunk that you don’t remember what you did last night. For this sort of education to be effective, you need to educate their parents as well.

Another way to provide services to young people are ‘one-stop shops’, or securely funded youth centres where young people can chill out and speak to staff who are trained specialists that can relate to young people. This idea was strongly supported at the Forum. We feel a service like this is particularly important in rural areas.

We need to change the perception that you can’t have a good time with your friends without alcohol.

Honestly, If we can use a grown man dressed as a polar bear to convince us to buy spirits at a football match, then surely

we could create another mascot to tell us that we can have a good time without drinking alcohol?

If we believed some of the ads on TV, we wouldn't dare talk to the opposite sex without dressing like Sergio! Wouldn't it be great for young people to know that they can still pick up without the aid of an alcoholic drink?

Why are there such clever, funny, memorable - not to mention expensive - ads that encourage drinking alcohol and such boring and pathetic ads to discourage young people from excessive drinking? What we like are the ads we remember: 'Give that man a new' – the larrikin boyfriend bomb-jumping into the jacuzzi – the thirsty Tongue...

Wouldn't it be great if the tongue could leave the party, cross the street and go home to bed when it has had enough?

Emily Andrijic

Many young people at the forum stated that using shock tactics in educational ads, promoting the safe consumption of alcohol would be a far more effective effect method in delivering this message. We want to see graphic images that show us the reality of these situations - how many brain cells we'd fry if we drank a whole slab? We want to witness what happens to our livers when we binge drink every weekend. And we want to see what really happens to a girl whose drink has been spiked with Rohypnol.

It is important to use a variety of technologies to promote safer consumption of alcohol - whether it's TV, radio, print media, email, mobile phones or the Internet. If you want messages to reach young people, then use the mediums of communication that we use – like emails and SMS messages.

Ready to drink products do appeal to young people. Young people in rehab programs told the Commission for Children and Young People that they choose to drink RTDs. Why?

Because it's easier, they look cool, get you pissed quickly and taste great! They especially target the younger female generation, which is strongly apparent in their advertising.

Role models include sportspeople, rappers, soapie stars and these people need to understand that they are symbols to young people. At the moment, our role models are either silent about the problems with alcohol, or are publicly seen drinking alcohol. They don't realise that young people look to them for guidance – we don't want them to tell us 'don't drink it's bad', but rather to show us how to drink responsibly, and that it is okay not to drink at all.

Other delegates at this Summit have discussed the possibility of placing warning labels on all alcohol products. We think this is imperative in the reduction of the consumption of alcohol.

Also, we think the Summit should consider looking at the packaging of the bottles, the way they look such as having fluoro colours or a teddy bear on the label! We like feeling

'cruisy' and 'breezy' and swallowing colourful vodka jelly shots.

Finally, we believe that an alcohol-specific youth hotline is needed that is a free call, won't appear on the phone bill and is modelled on the Kids' Helpline, which we have all heard of and trust.

For this Summit to be a success there needs to be a bi-partisan commitment to the rest of the summit and to implementing the recommendations made in the Communiqué.

A commitment must be made for young people, the liquor industry, the media and the broader community to work together in implementing the Summit recommendations at a state, regional and local level.