

The myth of addiction

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The last of a three-part series on the use, and abuse, of alcohol in our area.

The normal, problematic use of alcohol among young people casts Nova Scotia's culture of drinking in the dimmest of lights.

Kids are drinking more and earlier than their predecessors. Alcohol sales remain high with no sign of an upcoming lull in advertising.

"The point of all of this work is not to somehow ban alcohol," said Todd Leader, director of community health programs for the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA).

More to the point, it's looking at how we use it.

Throughout his professional career, Bridgewater police chief John Collyer has fought an "uphill battle" trying to warn parents against condoning these dangerous behaviours.

"You pump somebody's stomach out so many times or you're at the aftermath of a traffic accident," said a dismayed Collyer. "Those stick with you."

Speaking from his own experience, Collyer said he grew up with a father who, while "not terribly proud of it," had a drinking problem.

And like his dad, Collyer served in the military where drinking was not only blatant but almost compulsory.

Vending machines were stocked with beer instead of pop, said Collyer, and as a young officer, "You would be looked down upon, frowned upon, if you didn't show up to mess functions."

"Well, mess functions were drinking functions."

He said the culture has changed since but it wasn't until a car accident involving alcohol when Collyer truly reexamined his own views on drinking.

A bit drunk after a community party, Collyer got into a vehicle with someone who he thought was sober but wasn't.

The following accident led to permanent damage in his left arm which he said is held together by a collection of titanium pins, titanium and rods.

Collyer said his daughter witnessed the nearly year-long recovery he underwent and hopes she learned something from the experience.

"So some bad decisions were made that night ... one [in particular] I regret."

Yet heavy drinking still persists among young people today.

At his previous posting in New Minas, Staff-Sgt. Jean-Guy Richard, district commander of the Lunenburg County RCMP, saw property destroyed, parties turn into fights and "astronomical" levels of alcohol poisoning around the time students descended on Wolfville for university.

The town eventually restricted the closing time of licensed establishments to 1 a.m. It's actionable policy such as this which lies at the crux of Leader's argument.

Municipalities have the ability to control the accessibility of liquor through bylaws and zoning regulations, limiting stores and bars by location, or by restricting and prohibiting advertising on municipal land and at town events.

In 1989, the Municipality of Digby, for example, enacted a policy whereby no liquor could be kept or consumed within a municipal building.

Councillor Wayne Thorburne, who chairs the municipal alcohol project committee for Bridgewater and the Municipality of Lunenburg, said the town does not reimburse councillors for any expenses related to alcohol.

"That's a given. We don't encourage it. We don't endorse it. If you want to have a drink, then you pay for it out of your own pocket. It doesn't come out of the town's expense."

South Shore Health even adopted an alcohol position statement in November 2013 which addressed many of the concerns outlined by Thorburne and others.

In theory, if governments control access, Leader believes they can also change it.

Rigorous server intervention, such as ID'ing customers and cutting someone off, can reduce the harms of alcohol abuse and stem the influx of underage youth into bars and liquor stores.

Several provinces, including Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, require mandatory certification for servers working in licensed establishments. Nova Scotia does not.

Ultimately, alcohol is a drug and needs to be treated as such, but most are unwilling to go that far.

"It's a drug problem. It's our most significant one," said Leader, "but if I call it that then I have to feel guilty when I have a beer."

Alcohol is commonly used as a self-medicating practice given its ability to depress and lower inhibition, its effects exacerbated when combined with everything from prescription pills and weed to energy drinks.

For some individuals dealing with financial stress or trauma, it can offer an escape from pain and anxiety despite its destructive capabilities.

Leader, however, doesn't want to frame the dialogue around the "myth of addiction," something he blames the alcohol industry for doing.

The majority of individuals misuse or overuse alcohol and Leader, who is the former director of addiction and mental health services for South Shore Health, said the number of clients needing addiction-related interventions has not increased.

But if the industry condemns addiction while propping itself as the arbiter fighting it, Leader said it can still sell as much as it wants while deflecting attention from them and the real issue at hand — learned behaviour.

If adults don't tackle the issue for fear of a label, children will inform themselves on what constitutes acceptable



EMMA SMITH PHOTO

John Collyer, chief of the Bridgewater Police Service, recalls an incident from his youth which changed his views on drinking ever since.

behaviour.

However, Leader was swift to downplay the over-bloated benefits of education alone. Knowledge, he said, doesn't change behaviour.

"If it worked then we'd be all over it but it doesn't work."

The answer doesn't lie solely in changing school curriculum, inviting guest speakers or showing pictures of highway tragedies.

Just like with seat belts, laws change attitudes. "This is about a systemic change in a culture," said Leader.

Which may be why youth, although victims of the problem, might be its solution.

"Your definition of normal," he said pointedly to me. "Your generation's definition of normal is completely different. It's all you know."

But for generational change to take place, it will need time.

The hope is with enough persistence from groups like the Lunenburg County RCMP Youth Advisory Committee, community leaders, politicians and volunteers, we may see a cultural shift for the better.

"We need the concept of drinking to get drunk," said Leader, "to be a non-existent concept."