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MEDIA RELEASE

Increase in heavy drinkers leading to more harm, new Australian analysis shows

- **Heavy drinkers drinking more, light drinkers drinking less**
- **Gap between the sexes disappears**
- **Stringent policies and enforcement linked to lower consumption**

Very heavy drinking among the nation's top 10% of drinkers has increased in the past decade while lighter drinkers have cut back further, according to a new analysis of Australian drinking habits since 2001.

Dr Michael Livingston, who will present the results at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre Annual Symposium, analysed data from four successive National Drug Strategy Household Surveys since 2001. Each survey involved more than 20,000 Australians aged 14 and over. The top 10% of drinkers are drinking between four and five per cent more than a decade ago. At the other end of the scale more people were abstaining altogether and lighter drinkers were drinking even less.

On average Australians drink 10 litres of pure alcohol a year per head. The top 10% of drinkers now account for 52% of total alcohol consumed, compared with 49% a decade ago. On average the top five per cent of drinkers are drinking 140 more standard drinks a year compared with a decade ago.

Dr Livingston, a post-doctoral research fellow at NDARC's Drug Policy Modelling Program, said the results partially explain why authorities have seen a sharp increase in harms measured by hospitalisations and emergency presentations in many states and territories and by police data on alcohol-related assaults.

"The picture we have of drinking in Australia is conflicted," he said. "Overall consumption has dropped but harms have increased. This new evidence about the divergence in habits between heavy and light drinkers goes some way to explaining the apparent contradictions.

“These changes may appear small, but increases in very heavy drinking have strong impacts on the risk of illness and injury,” said Dr Livingston.

“An effective policy response to these changes in drinking habits may be to target certain interventions such as brief interventions in health settings to the heaviest drinkers as a way to supplement broader responses such as increased taxation and reduced alcohol availability.”

A separate study to be presented by Dr Catherine Chapman and Associate Professor Tim Slade will show that around the world traditional differences in male and female drinking levels have all but disappeared over the course of the last century. The study gathered and synthesised data from 75 studies in 59 countries, including Australia, among people born from the 1900s to the 1990s.

Men born in the early 1900s were over three times more likely to drink alcohol than women. This ratio has decreased so that women born in the 1990s are almost as likely as men to drink alcohol.

“Similar changes have occurred with respect to heavy episodic or binge drinking,” said Dr Chapman. “Indicators from Australia suggest the drinking patterns of males and females are in line with global trends.”

The good news is that policy makes a difference. An analysis of 16 policies in nine countries demonstrates there is a relationship between the stringency of policies, the effectiveness with which they are enforced, and resulting levels of consumption.

Dr Natacha Carragher and colleagues from NDARC have developed a robust tool to measure the stringency and enforcement of different alcohol policies. They applied it to assess 16 policies that have been implemented in nine countries in the Western Pacific Region – Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Each country was scored out of a possible 100 on the stringency and enforcement of its alcohol policies.

Countries with higher alcohol policy scores had lower per capita consumption. Australia had the highest overall rating but was weak on specific policies such as advertising.

“This tool suggested that alcohol policies work in reducing consumption,” said Dr Carragher. “Australia has many strong policies, particularly in relation to motor vehicles but still has significant gaps, particularly in relation to advertising policies. Evidence suggests that if we further strengthen these policies, we could significantly reduce risky drinking.”

WHEN: Wednesday 4 September 2013

TIME: 10.15am

WHERE: John Niland Scientia Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney

SPEAKING: Dr Michael Livingston; Dr Catherine Chapman; Dr Natacha Carragher

The [program](#) and [abstracts](#) are available online.

NOTES FOR MEDIA

- To register for the full day please contact ndarc.symposium@unsw.edu.au
- To interview speakers in the lead up to the Symposium contact NDARC Communications Department:

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