

War on demon drink

Alcohol abuse costs South Africans an estimated R245bn a year, and policies are needed to mitigate its harm in the same way that smoking is tackled.



Alcohol abuse is costing South Africa dearly in terms of money and loss of life. Image: Nicholas Tarling [Free Digital Photos](#)

This is according to an article titled The Cost of Harmful Alcohol Use published in the South African Medical Journal. It is based on research commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry to assist the government in making policies on the sale of alcohol.

Authors included the Medical Research Council's Richard Matzopoulos and Joanne Corrigall from the University of Cape Town's School of Public Health.

The article found current policies around the sale and cost of alcohol were designed to maximise industry profits, taxes and job creation, but did not mitigate the harmful effect of alcohol on society.

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has called for a ban on alcohol advertising, which has been widely opposed by the industry on the basis that it would lead to job losses.

Matzopoulos told The Times that increasing taxes on alcohol, introducing a minimum price for alcoholic beverages, trading hour restrictions, increasing the minimum age for alcohol consumption and advertising restrictions all reduced demand for alcohol.

Research for the World Health Organisation by UCT economist Corne van Walbeek found that increasing the cost of alcohol reduces how much people drink.

"Increasing prices by about 10% means people drink about 5% less," said Van Walbeek.

The authors found:

- Alcohol is the most abused drug by South Africans;
- Alcohol contributes to 7% of the total disease burden in South Africa;
- It is the third-largest contributor to death and disability in South African after sexually transmitted infections and interpersonal violence;
- Individuals spend about 13% of discretionary disposable income on alcohol;
- Nearly a quarter of driver deaths would be prevented if people didn't drive drunk;
- R9-billion is spent by police and prisons in a year on alcohol-related crimes.

Head of the department of emergency medicine at Helen Joseph Hospital, Dr Lara Goldstein, said patients who had been assaulted had often been drinking. This implies interpersonal violence takes place when both the perpetrator and victim are drunk.

She said often pedestrians injured in traffic collisions had been drinking, or the driver of the car had been drinking.

The Human Sciences Research Council has reported that smoking in South Africa has decreased from 32% of adults in 1993 to 16.4% in 2012.

The council attributes this to government policies that include warnings, a ban on smoking in indoor public places and high taxes on cigarettes.

Source: The Times via I-Net Bridge

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