True cost of alcohol related ambulance call-outs revealed

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New research has revealed the true cost of ambulance call-outs to deal with drink fuelled incidents.
The study, by Newcastle University experts, working with the North East Ambulance service (NEAS) and the North East Alcohol Office (BALANCE) looked purely at the cost to the ambulance service and not at the total cost to the NHS. It found that in one year there were an estimated 31,000 emergency calls for drink related incidents in the North East, a total cost of £9m to local ambulance services. That means one in ten of call-outs were alcohol related.

Extrapolated to the entire country, that would be around £150m a year. And this is likely to be an underreporting of the real figure as it only covered incidents where the injured person was clearly drunk.

To get the figures the researchers combined digitally recorded incident

logs from the ambulance service between April 2009 and March 2010, with more detailed scrutiny of records.

Eileen Kaner, Professor of public health at Newcastle University and an author of the research, published in the journal, *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, said: “It is clear that drinking hits us all in the pocket. This study just looked at the cost directly for the Ambulance Service, it didn’t take into account all the other NHS and policing costs of dealing with drunken behaviour. And this is not just a problem among the young, we found a large proportion of these call-outs were for middle aged people.

“Pre-loading is a really big factor these days. People are drinking a lot more at home before they go out and then carrying on once they are in pubs and bars as well.

“There is a very strong link between alcohol price and consumption. Minimum alcohol pricing has to be looked at very seriously. That would at least curb part of the pre-loading element. Many of these call-outs are preventable.”

Richard Ilderton, (pictured) a paramedic with the North East Ambulance Service has had years of experience in dealing with drunken people on the weekend shift.

He said: “I have been assaulted, both verbally and physically, as have most of my colleagues. There are problems every weekend.

“It’s not just the callout for the people affected by booze but drunken bystanders can cause big problems as well.

“I had one call out where I had an unconscious woman in the back of the ambulance and a man decided to sit in front of the ambulance on the road and eat his pizza. He refused to move and in the end I had to get the

police involved. I was held up for about ten minutes, fortunately the woman was okay but it could have been a lot more serious.

“And the other thing to remember is that on Friday and Saturday night people still have ordinary accidents, we still get called out to the regular incidents. It just puts a massive extra pressure on the service and potentially puts lives at risk.”

Jay Duckett, Clinic Audit Manager at NEAS, said: “Unfortunately, alcohol is a significant factor in a high percentage of the calls we attend – incidents which could often be avoided. People who drink excessively are putting an extra strain on the service.

“Ambulance vehicles and paramedics are our most precious resource, and we need them to be free to attend emergencies where life is in immediate danger. As well as tying up resources, alcohol often results in our crews being either verbally or physically abused. Behaviour which is completely unacceptable.

“We know from the clear-cut cases on our patient record forms that alcohol plays a major role in many of the cases we attend. We would urge everyone in the North East to drink in moderation.”

Provided by Newcastle University

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