

Road toll and smoking campaigns good precedents for the fight against alcohol-fuelled violence

January 6 2014, by Rod McClure

There is enormous outrage in the community about the recent deaths from alcohol-fuelled violence. There is the risk, however, that in the same way that the gun debate in the US flares after every shooting then fades away without change – a similar pattern will emerge in Australia. And as surely as each death fades in our collective memory, another young man will be king-hit in the street and end up in a critical condition in hospital or fatally injured.

In the wake of this week's violence there have been calls for reforms of the sentencing laws for alcohol-fuelled violence and for changes to the 3 am curfew for licensed premises. There have also been impassioned pleas by emergency doctors and parents for people to simply drink less.

There has also been an overwhelming frustration and despair that this is an issue for which there is no answer. However Australia has been faced with similar [public](#) health issues – that at the time seemed insurmountable – that we have collectively tackled and defeated and we can learn from these to tackle alcohol and its impact on our lives.

By 1970 Victoria had an appallingly high road toll. The year before - deaths numbered 1,061 (for comparison in that state in 2013 it was 242) – and there were numerous calls for driver behaviour change, essentially to no avail. That is, until the community and community leaders stood up to be counted, and called a stop to the carnage – and now road deaths are

down to a quarter of that they were then and still falling.

What changed was, simply, community commitment. We had had enough. We did not want to live in a society where you had to run the gauntlet with death every time you crossed the street or got into your car. As a society we committed to a long term strategic roll-out of a [road safety](#) program based on better cars, better roads and better road-user behaviour, all regulated by legislation that was rigorously enforced. And the strength of this ongoing commitment was underlined earlier this week by the Victorian Premier Denis Napthine who wrote in an editorial in the News Limited papers that "the Coalition Government will never rest until the road toll is zero."

Critical to the success of this long term strategic approach was the continual engagement of the public in the debate – ensuring that the community became a stakeholder of the policies underpinning the road safety response. The famous TAC advertising campaigns, and the media in all its forms, were crucial agents in the maintenance of this public debate and continues to be today.

Preventing innocent deaths from alcohol-fuelled violence is no more difficult than preventing your children being killed by speeding drivers. However, putting a stop to this violence takes more than simple outrage at each new event. What it takes is the community as a whole saying that "enough is enough" - committing to a long term strategic roll out of public safety program programs based on safer public environments, safer alcohol use, and safer public behaviour, all regulated by legislation that is rigorously enforced. The media, and community groups, and public advocacy groups, can and will play an important role in supporting an ongoing [public debate](#) about the legitimacy of the policies needed to underpin a successful long term result.

Making changes to public health policies is not rocket science. Problems

of public safety can be solved. Our success in bringing down the road toll and the deaths from lung cancer should give us confidence, but it also gives us no place to hide. If we don't solve the problem of [public safety](#) it will not "be because we can't solve the problem, it will be because we are not sufficiently committed to doing so. It will be because the politicians are too timid to lead; the public too selfish to change their habits – or too apathetic to try and change our societal norms; and industry too focused on putting personal profits ahead of public good.

We already have the blueprint for how to change entrenched societal behaviour. We have strategies that are based in evidence and are known to work. What we need is the collective will and a government(s) that is (are) willing to commit to making tougher laws and tougher decisions.

The community has said it has had enough. Surely it's time for our politicians to take action until the injury and death rate from alcohol fuelled violence is – like the road toll – actively being pushed towards zero. We've done it before – with smoking and with road safety – now it's time to do the same with [alcohol](#) fuelled violence, on the streets, and in our homes.

Provided by Monash University

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