



**arbias**

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## **MEDIA RELEASE – MONDAY AUGUST 6<sup>TH</sup> 2007**

**Massive new campaign warns 2 million Australians risk permanent brain damage because of current risky drinking behaviour – and highlights hundreds of thousands of Australians are already out there with completely undiagnosed alcohol related brain injuries.**

**The “Hangover For Life” campaign is being launched by the not for profit group arbias with full support from many organisations in the field including The Australian National Council on Drugs, The Australian Drug Foundation, Community Alcohol Action Network, The Mental Health Council of Australia, The Alcohol Education Research Foundation, Turning Point, Australian Parents for Drug Free Youth, The Mental Health Research Institute and many others.**

**arbias is Australia’s only organisation treating alcohol related brain damage. CEO Sonia Berton warns there are now enough Australians at risk of alcohol related brain damage to fill 4,800 jumbo jets.**

**Campaign organisers will release new Roy Morgan research on Monday August 6<sup>th</sup> which reveals 69.4% of men did not know or could not say how many drinks a day for 8 – 10 years might mean they were risking brain damage ... and 58.7% of women also gave incorrect answers or couldn’t say how many drinks a day for 8 – 10 years would mean they were risking brain damage.**

**88.5% of Australians don’t know the number of Australians currently at risk of alcohol related brain injury, 1 in 5 males aged 14 – 17 believe you would either need 21 or 24 standard drinks a day for 8 – 10 years to cause brain damage (the answer is 6) and 79% of Australians want to see a Federal Government campaign educating people about alcohol related brain damage.**

**Sonia Berton says a whole generation of brain damaged Australians will emerge based on current drinking levels and says treatment providers will be swamped in the next 10 years because of this massive invisible issue.**

**arbias is calling for the Federal Government and alcohol industry to fund a \$20 million education campaign to be on air by November 2007.**

**It’s now estimated a staggering one in eight Australians are risking an alcohol related brain injury – and 1 in 2 young Australians aged 18-24 risk damage because of binge drinking. Free information sheets will be available at [hangoverforlife.com](http://hangoverforlife.com)**

**A major new campaign – Hangover For Life – will warn today (Monday August 6<sup>th</sup>) that 2 million Australians currently risk brain damage because of their current risky drinking behaviour.**

arbias – the not-for-profit group that is behind the campaign – has the support of many of Australia’s top agencies including:

- The Australian National Council on Drugs
- The Australian Drug Foundation
- Community Alcohol Action Network
- The Mental Health Council of Australia
- The Alcohol Education Research Foundation
- Turning Point
- Australian Parents for Drug Free Youth
- The Mental Health Research Institute
- Jesuit Social Services
- The National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Related Disorders as well as numerous other community groups.

Recently it received support for its work from the Dalai Lama who acknowledged that the work of arbias is vital.

arbias highlights that without doubt – right now - there are hundreds of thousands of Australians living in the community who have alcohol related brain damage that is completely undiagnosed.

arbias warns the Australian community must become better educated about alcohol related brain injury because alcohol is causing mammoth damage in the community.

As part of the “Hangover For Life” campaign free information sheets will be made available for all members of the public to obtain from [hangoverforlife.com](http://hangoverforlife.com). People can also download a free checklist to see if they are at risk of an alcohol related brain injury.

arbias CEO Sonia Berton is calling on the Federal Government and the alcohol industry to immediately fund a \$20 million campaign to educate Australians about the issue – she says most people simply do not know how many standard drinks can cause brain damage.

New Roy Morgan research being released today (Monday August 6<sup>th</sup>) by arbias paints a remarkable picture of the lack of knowledge about alcohol related brain damage.

The new Roy Morgan research reveals:

- **About 88.5% of Australians don’t know even approximately the number of Australians currently at risk of alcohol related brain injury.**
- **79.1% of Australians generally want to see a Federal Government campaign on educating Australians on alcohol related brain damage.**
- **69.4% of men either couldn’t say or gave an incorrect answer to the number of drinks a day for 8 to 10 years that would mean they were risking brain damage (the correct answer is 6 or more drinks for men according to arbias).**

- **58.7% of women either couldn't say or gave an incorrect answer to the number of drinks a day for 8 to 10 years that would mean they were risking brain damage (the correct answer is 3 or more drinks for women according to arbias).**
- **9.3% of 14-17 year old males think you would need to drink 24 or more standard drinks a day for 8-10 years to risk brain damage ... this is concerning ... and a further 10.7% believe you would need to drink 21 standard drinks a day. This means in total 20% (or 1 in 5) of males aged 14-17 believe you would need either 21 or 24 standard drinks a day for 8-10 years to risk brain damage ... this is very concerning.**
- **51.4% of Australians cannot recognise or cannot say the symptoms of alcohol related brain injury.**
- **When asked, if you were drinking every day for 8-10 years how many standard drinks a day would put you at risk of brain damage, 14.2% of 14-17 year olds (male and female) said the answer was either 18, 21 or 24 ... a very concerning finding, particularly considering that 8.4% of this age group believed that the answer was 24.**

Sonia Berton from arbias said "Imagine 4,800 Jumbo jets full of Australians in the sky... then imagine those jets crashing. That would be considered an unbelievable tragedy. Right now – in 2007 – there are enough Australians at risk of alcohol related brain damage because of their drinking behaviour to fill 4,800 Jumbo jets."

"This is a public health crisis that is looming and it is not a question of how much you have to drink to sustain an alcohol related brain injury, it's a question of how little."

The Hangover For Life campaign highlights that:

- **Men who drink 6 standard drinks a day for 8 – 10 years are clearly at risk of alcohol related brain impairment.**
- **Women who drink 3 standard drinks a day for 8 – 10 years are at risk of an alcohol related brain injury.**

Sonia Berton said "It's absolutely horrific and it's time people were told. Where are the ads and messages warning people? Why aren't we being told? Alcohol related brain injury affects as many as 1 in 8 Australians. It's slow, progressive and ultimately this damage then affects a person's thinking, emotions, communication and ability to care for themselves."

"Many people are simply unaware that they are living with alcohol related brain impairment until the damage is so severe. Because Australia has moved to becoming a binge drinking culture, something has to be done. In the next 10 years treatment providers will be swamped with alcohol related issues."

arbias board member and top clinical neuropsychologist Martin Jackson said "I am certain there are hundreds of thousands of people out there undiagnosed with this injury. That has to be a massive concern. There's an incredible lack of knowledge about this topic. People often get brain damage long before they actually get sick. By

the time these people show up in the health system, unfortunately they have often lost jobs, families and their thinking abilities. People don't realise how easy it is to drink at hazardous levels. A bottle of wine with dinner every night is potentially hazardous."

Australian National Council on Drugs Chairman Dr John Herron said "Alcohol related brain damage is a very under reported issue for this country. It is unfortunately true that too many people drink to excess and that translates into many problems for the community – and massive health costs. We as a community must start to confront the simple reality that alcohol related brain damage is a real risk for many people and a growing problem for our nation."

Sonia Berton added "The most common type of damage is to the frontal lobe of the brain and that then affects a person's ability to plan, organise and control behaviour. What people don't realise is that what's often considered to be social drinking is – in fact – likely to be causing brain damage."

"Alcohol related brain damage is more often than not permanent. Mild alcohol related brain damage is almost impossible to spot without specialist assessment."

"The affect on a family can be absolutely devastating. By the time a person has the damage they may have lost their income, their home and they may have risked the welfare of their family. They may be before a court or in jail. For many people with an alcohol related brain injury, family and friends may have abandoned them – usually against their wishes but because the alcohol related brain damage is starting to consume everybody else."

"Without doubt few Australians realise that alcohol related brain injury exists outside of chronic alcoholism. Many people think you'd have to be drinking several bottles of wine every day or slabs of beer. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"We cannot have a head-in-the-sand approach to this. Our country has ignored the reality of alcohol related brain damage for decades. It's a significant issue affecting the lives of millions of Australians, their families and carers. The Federal Government must – as a matter of absolute urgency – put strategies into place to address this mammoth issue."

"There are in fact no services outside of Melbourne providing screening, diagnosis or specialist treatment in this area. If you live anywhere else, the support mechanism isn't really there."

"Every cent being raised through taxes on alcohol should in fact be addressing alcohol related harm and that includes awareness of alcohol related brain damage. Alcohol is no longer just part of society's entertainment, it's become *the* entertainment."

"In my view the alcohol industry itself must wake up. It often doesn't know this problem exists and is generally taking a head-in-the-sand approach. The alcohol industry must accept the hand it's played in one of Australia's most prominent health issue. It should be genuinely displaying a clear sense of corporate social responsibility. In my view right now that's noticeably absent."

“The money spent on alcohol in this country is overwhelming. From our own research it’s clear that a suburban bottle shop in a city such as Melbourne or Sydney is often taking \$30,000 per day and around Christmas \$50,000 in just 24 hours.” The new campaign will highlight that many GPs aren’t aware of the high prevalence of alcohol related brain injury and Hangover for Life is urging GPs, health professionals, health and welfare workers to download information from [hangoverforlife.com](http://hangoverforlife.com).

arbias says a \$20 million campaign needs to be underway by November 2007 to educate Australians. It highlights funds are also needed to distribute screening tools that will allow GPs, hospitals and others to detect alcohol related brain injury earlier.

Graeme Alford is one of the many Australians who have an alcohol related brain injury. Graeme Alford said “I had absolutely no idea of the terrible affect alcohol would have on my life. I went from being a practising barrister to a bank robber within 5 years and lost over 40 points from my IQ and dropped from the top 2% of the population to the bottom 10% in the areas of memory and concentration. Along the way there was enormous collateral damage to my friends, family and society. I was one of the lucky drinkers who found a way to stop drinking before the damage became irreparable. I have an alcohol related brain injury.”

Sonia Berton added “What we are talking about is a whole generation of brain damaged adults emerging in the future because of binge drinking by many young Australians. Governments have ignored the reality for decades and that just has to stop. Part of the tragedy is that alcohol related brain injury is entirely preventable. Let’s get real and start dealing with the issue.”

“This is a massive invisible issue. Alcohol related brain injury is very difficult to diagnose – and some people with the injury function adequately for quite a while not realising short term memory loss is a clue there is a problem. People may suffer anxiety, paranoia, depression, anger and confusion. The impact on the family can be completely devastating.”

Latest statistics show the amount of alcohol available for consumption in Australia during the period 2005-06 was 162 million litres. The number of people drinking at risky/high risk levels has constantly increased during the last 3 national health surveys from 8.2% in 1995 to 10% in 2001 and now 13.4% in 2004-05. In 2004-05, 15% of adult males and 12% of adult females were drinking at a risky/high risk level.

The arbias website has substantial information about alcohol related brain damage for people to read as well as family and carers, professionals and health practitioners. The multi-lingual website actually offers information in 24 different languages at [www.hangoverforlife.com](http://www.hangoverforlife.com).

**MEDIA ENQUIRIES TO DANYEL WALKER ON (03) 9769 6488  
New Roy Morgan research on alcohol related brain  
injury released by arbias. This information is strictly**

## **embargoed and not for use prior to Monday August 6<sup>th</sup>.**

- **About 88.5% of Australians don't know (even approximately) the number of Australians currently at risk of alcohol related brain injury.**
- **58.7% of women either couldn't say or gave an incorrect answer to the number of drinks a day for 8 to 10 years that would mean they were risking brain damage (the correct answer is 3 or more drinks for women according to arbias).**
- **69.4% of men either couldn't say or gave an incorrect answer to the number of drinks a day for 8 to 10 years that would mean they were risking brain damage (the correct answer is 6 or more drinks for men according to arbias).**
- **9.3% of 14-17 year old males think you would need to drink 24 or more standard drinks a day for 8-10 years to risk brain damage ... this is concerning ... and a further 10.7% believe you would need to drink 21 standard drinks a day. This means in total 20% (or 1 in 5) of males aged 14-17 believe you would need either 21 or 24 standard drinks a day for 8-10 years to risk brain damage ... this is very concerning.**
- **19.8% of females surveyed (i.e. 1 in 5) said if they drank 4 standard drinks a day for 8-10 years it was either not likely, not at all likely, impossible or they could not say that they would get brain damage. This means 1 in 5 were wrong - in fact drinking at this level, a female is risking brain damage.**
- **51.4% of Australians cannot recognise or cannot say the symptoms of alcohol related brain injury.**
- **26.6% of men ... ie over 1 in 4 ... think it is not likely or couldn't say if 6 drinks a day for 8 to 10 years means they risk brain damage ... in short, over 1 in 4 men are unaware that it is unsafe to drink over 6 drinks a day for 8-10 years.**
- **94.5% of 14-15 year olds want to see a federal campaign educating Australians about alcohol related brain damage.**
- **79.1% of Australians generally want to see a Federal Government campaign on educating Australians on alcohol related brain damage.**
- **When asked, if you were drinking every day for 8-10 years how many standard drinks a day would put you at risk of brain damage, 14.2% of 14-17 year olds (male and female) said the answer was either 18, 21 or 24**

**... a very concerning finding, particularly considering that 8.4% of this age group believed that the answer was 24.**

- **9.3% of 14-17 year old males think you would need 24 drinks a day over 8-10 years to risk brain damage ... again, a very worrying finding, as the correct figure is 6 drinks a day for men.**
- **26.6% of women surveyed said 6 drinks a day over 8-10 years would risk brain damage ... this is double the actual amount ... 10% of women actually believe 12 or more standard drinks means you risk brain damage ... this is 4 times the actual amount.**

## **Key Points About Alcohol Related Brain Injury From arbias**

1. 1 in 8 Australians are at risk of alcohol related brain damage.

2. People with alcohol related brain damage, more often than not, will be unaware they have it until the damage is permanent and irreversible.
3. Every Australian who drinks at risky levels is at risk – despite their age, background, gender or socio economic background.
4. Alcohol related brain damage is, more often than not, permanent and irreversible.
5. Alcohol related brain damage is a highly prevalent but often misdiagnosed condition.
6. The personal, social, economic costs of alcohol related brain damage to the Australian community are enormous.
7. ARBI is referred to as ‘the invisible problem’, despite the seriousness of the condition, people are often treated as if there is ‘nothing wrong’ as they ‘look fine’.
8. ARBI is under-recognised amongst health professionals.
9. Alcohol related brain damage is preventable.
10. The alcohol industry must work with federal and state governments on education and prevention programs.

## Alcohol – What It Can Do To The Brain

Alcohol is a poison to the brain. Put simply, it's toxic. Regular drinking can damage the brain in a number of ways. Alcohol can kill off the cells in the parts of our brain that actually controls our memory, thinking and coordination.

Alcohol can also affect cells in the brain that deal with how we organise ourselves and how we plan, think and learn new skills.

There are other ways that “heavy drinking” injures the brain. The brain needs Thiamine (Vitamin B1) to keep doing its job properly. Alcohol actually gets in the way of the body being able to absorb Thiamine ... so put simply when someone is using alcohol regularly, the brain may not be getting the proper nutrients it requires.

Large doses of Vitamin B1 (Thiamine) are often used to treat some of the most serious problems caused by heavy drinking. Australia has fortified foods with thiamine to protect people against the worst ravages of thiamine deficiency.

We aren't all the same. Drinking doesn't affect everybody in the same way and what is too much alcohol for someone to handle, may be different for another person. This is not the same as 'tolerance' to the intoxicating effects of alcohol.

Experts highlight both men and women should definitely have 1 alcohol free day every week. Ideally more, of course. People should never be relying on alcohol as part of their day and people should realise that you can have just as much fun – and be just as silly - at a social event or party without even having a drink of alcohol.

How badly alcohol actually affects the brain will depend on many factors including:

- How much the person drinks.
- How many years they have been drinking for.
- If they binge drink.
- If they drink every day.

The affects of alcohol on the brain will also depend on:

- The person's age.
- Whether they are male or female.
- How healthy the person is.
- How well the person eats.

When describing how heavy drinking has caused an injury to the brain, experts use the words 'mild', 'moderate' or 'severe'.

If you sustain a moderate to severe alcohol related brain injury there may be physical problems. This may include poor balance, coordination and difficulties with walking.

People may experience numbness, pins and needles and burning sensations in the legs and feet – referred to as “peripheral neuropathy”.

An alcohol related brain injury may also change the way a person sleeps, their mood and personality.

If the frontal lobe of the brain is damaged (this is the part of the brain that controls our thinking), people will have real problems planning and organising their lives and controlling their behaviour. They may have problems with short-term memory and may find it difficult to take in new information. In its most serious form alcohol related brain injury can cause profound problems with a person's memory and will lead to anterograde amnesia – the inability to lay down any new memories. This condition is referred to as Korsakoff's amnesia.

## **A Checklist – Are You At Risk?**

**To find out whether you or someone you know may be suffering from ARBI please complete the following checklist.**

**(Note this checklist does not constitute a diagnostic instrument)**

1. Do you consume alcohol daily?
2. Males: Have you consumed more than 6 standard drinks per day for longer than 10 years?  
Females: Have you consumed more than 3 standard drinks per day for longer than 10 years?
3. Have you had periods of poor nutrition whilst drinking?

If you answered yes to questions 2 or 3 please proceed to the next section

4. Do you have difficulties in any of the following areas
  - Solving problems
  - Not learning from mistakes
  - Short term memory
  - Learning new information
  - Planning and organising
  - Seeing the consequences of your behaviour
  - Being flexible in your thinking
  - Frustration with thinking tasks
  - Adapting to change in behaviour patterns and routines

If you answered yes to any item in question 4 please talk to your doctor or health professional

## **Questions And Answers ... arbias Chief Executive Officer**

### **Sonia Berton Answers A Range Of Questions**

#### **1. What exactly is alcohol related brain injury?**

Alcohol related brain damage is the physical injury that is sustained to the brain as a result of alcohol consumption. The most common brain disorder associated with alcohol consumption is frontal lobe damage. This generally results in changes to thinking and emotions. The ability to plan, organise, control behaviour and adapt to new and changing environment is generally affected. The most severe is what is known as Korsakoff's Syndrome. This is where a person's brain has been so damaged by alcohol that they no longer have the capacity to learn or acquire any new information.

#### **2. How do you get it?**

An individual gets alcohol related brain damage through consuming alcohol at levels that some Australians might consider to be 'social drinking' – more than 6 standard drinks a day for men and more than 3 for women over a period of around 8 to 10 years.

#### **3. Can it be cured?**

Alcohol related brain damage is more often than not, permanent.

There are cases where people with alcohol related brain damage have made significant improvements after ceasing their use. Generally speaking, this is limited to those who are younger (under 40 years old), have mild alcohol related brain damage, abstain from alcohol and other drug usage and follow a well balanced diet. The improvements to a person's functioning once diagnosed with alcohol related brain damage are more usually the results of modifications in a person's routine and the strategies put into place to compensate for the brain damage that is permanent.

#### **4. How easy is it to spot?**

Mild alcohol related brain damage is almost impossible to detect without a specialist assessment undertaken by a health care professional. This assessment is done by a Neuropsychologist. Most people do not know they have alcohol related brain damage until the damage is moderate or severe. The initial symptoms may include mild memory loss or difficulties in planning and adjusting to change. These can easily be brushed off as a sign of stress or age, or put down to the acute effects of alcohol –things like hangovers. People with mild alcohol related brain damage will often, as many people do in general, grow an increasing reliance on diaries and other prompts in order to sustain their normal day to day routines. This is why it is so difficult to detect in the early stages. It is not until the onset of moderate to severe alcohol related brain damage that it is noticed, more often than not, by people around them. Self awareness can deteriorate to such an extent in moderate to severe ARBI that the individual with this disorder does not know they have alcohol related brain damage, they have no insight into the changes to their thinking or the subsequent behaviour and will often display no insight, despite the gravity of their situation.

## **5. How does it affect people?**

Alcohol related brain damage is slow, progressive disorder of the brain caused by alcohol consumption. Aside from the cognitive effects that include difficulty with controlling emotions and impulses, lack of insight and awareness, short term memory loss, changes to personality and behaviour there are the costs to the person's life through loss of employment, subsequent loss of income, loss of relationships, loss of homes, loss of self esteem and identity.

## **6. How much impact does ARBI have on a person's life and what knock on affects does it have?**

While a person with mild alcohol related brain damage can, with appropriate supports, function to almost full capacity, moderate and severe alcohol related brain damage has devastating effects for an individual, their family and carers. It is almost impossible to maintain a job with moderate or severe alcohol related brain impairment as there can be no capacity to adapt to new or changing routines or environment. With a loss of job comes loss of income. The stress placed on families and friends is more often than not, unbearable and it is not uncommon for a person with moderate or severe alcohol related brain damage to present with no family or social connections.

## **7. How many standard drinks could cause ARBI?**

As little as 6-8 standard drinks per day for males and three to four standard drinks for female's places a person at risk of alcohol related brain damage. While it generally takes a period of around 8 to 10 for the damage to become apparent, the amount consumed over this period is what many Australians would consider 'normal' or 'social' drinking.

There is also a dangerous and widely held misconception that six standard drinks per day equate to six beers or six glasses of wine. Six standards drinks for males equals just over four cans of full strength beer or three 200mls glasses of wine. For women, three standard drinks equates to just over two cans of full strength beer per day or just over a 200ml glass of wine.

## **8. As far as we know, how many Australians have an ARBI?**

One in eight Australians are thought to be at risk, given the population based surveys of alcohol use behaviour. That's around 2 million Australians that potentially are at risk of alcohol related brain damage. Alcohol related brain damage does not discriminate. It cuts across age, sex, race and socio economic background. There is a widely held misconception in Australia that alcohol related brain damage only affects people from low socio economic backgrounds or the unemployed. Whilst alcohol related brain damage may certainly lead to a loss of income, it can affect any Australians regardless of where they live or how much they earn. In fact, some of our most highly paid Australians are most at risk. It is increasingly common for example, for highly paid executives to be managing stress and pressure associated with work, through alcohol.

The one in eight figure does not include those with brain damage indirectly caused by alcohol such as road accidents, falls or workplace accidents. If we were to take these figures into account, the number of Australians with brain damage caused through alcohol would be significantly higher.

## **9. How do we know this is true?**

There is significant volume of research that concludes that regular consumption of alcohol will lead to permanent brain damage. More than three standard drinks per day for women and more than six standard drinks per day for men will place an individual at risk of alcohol related brain damage. In Australia, one in eight Australians drink alcohol at this level every day. The level of drinking that places an individual at risk of developing brain damage is considered 'normal' by many Australians. Added to this, are the misconceptions about what constitutes a standard drink. Many Australians view six standard drinks as six cans of beer or six classes of wine, when in fact it is far less than this.

## **10. How devastating is an ARBI for the person?**

Alcohol related brain damage is cumulative. Most people at risk of alcohol related brain damage do not know they are at risk. Most people with emerging brain damage caused by alcohol do not know they have it. The symptoms are generally masked for several years. It is not until an individual shows the signs of moderate or severe alcohol related brain damage that they come to the attention of family or support services. By this stage, the alcohol use may be entrenched, and the damage to the brain is irreversible. One of the most important facets of the brain is destroyed at the severe stage of brain damage. That is self awareness and insight. A person may have little insight into their condition, and continue to use alcohol, no matter how damaging it may be to themselves and those around them. They will often continue to consume alcohol once knowledge of the effect it has had becomes obvious, regardless of whether they have lost loved ones, their job, their income, their home or presented before a court due to their behaviour. Alcohol related brain impairment certainly complicates the treatment of alcohol, as many treatments are based on increasing a person's insight into their behaviour.

## **11. How devastating is an ARBI for their family?**

The effects of alcohol related brain damage on families are utterly devastating. Severe alcohol related brain damage does not leave much room for improvement in a person's life. By the time a person has impaired cognitive functioning, they may lose their income, their home, risk the welfare of their family, begin to display serious mental health issues. In some cases they may present before a court and subsequently be incarcerated due to their behaviour. For many people with ARBI, family and friends may have abandoned them, typically unwillingly but it's a often call between their own physical and mental health and the needs of a family member affected by alcohol related brain damage.

It's an excruciating decision to have to make and it's not uncommon for family members to then spend the remainder of their own lives tormented by unanswered questions and feelings of guilt. The 'what if?' questions. Similarly, it's not uncommon for family members to jeopardize their own well being, their own pursuit of happiness in life to continue to support an individual that has almost no hope of recovery to 'normality'. If there is one thing in life that all human beings connect with, it is hope. Everyday, the brain damage created by alcohol is responsible for removing hope from the lives of millions of Australians and countless more across the globe.

## **12. Does Australia understand anything about ARBI ... if not, why not?**

Few Australians realize that alcohol related brain injury exists outside of 'chronic alcoholism'. Those who know about alcohol related brain damage, generally aren't aware of the low levels of alcohol consumption that places them at risk. A common question is 'How much do I need to drink before I am at risk of developing brain damage?' when the question really is 'How little do I need to drink before I am at risk of permanent brain damage?' More than three standard drinks per day for women and more than six standard drinks per day for men. Most Australians are shocked by this amount. Many Australians hold the view that brain damage through alcohol is sustained through drinking several slabs of beer or several bottles of wine each day. In fact, a six-pack of beer for men or a couple of glasses of wine for women place individuals at risk of permanent brain damage.

## **13. Why does the community need to wake up to this issue?**

Alcohol related brain damage is a very real and costly health issue which Australia needs to recognise. We must start openly talking and dealing with the issue. The problem will not go away with a head in the sand approach. Continuing with our current approach of ignoring the issue may well lead to the incidence of alcohol related brain damage rising. One in eight Australians are currently at risk of alcohol related brain damage. Alcohol related brain damage does not discriminate. At the rate that young Australians are drinking we are very concerned about the consequences of this generation's drinking behaviour for their later-life cognitive functioning.

The costs associated with alcohol related brain damage to Australia are now so significant that they have become very difficult to quantify in dollar terms. The \$50b the Australian Government makes on alcohol taxes is a drop in the ocean when compared to the costs of the damage caused by alcohol. Alcohol related brain damage could potentially affect the lives of over 2 million Australians. That's the equivalent to the entire state of Western or Southern Australia. There are the personal costs – the loss of relationships, jobs, income and home. Then there are the broader social and economic costs – unemployment and homelessness that in many cases lead to contact with the criminal justice system.

## **14. What is your message for Australians?**

Alcohol causes brain damage. It takes relatively little alcohol to put someone at risk of brain damage. One in eight Australians is at risk. You may not know you have alcohol related brain damage until it begins to have profound effects on your life... Alcohol related brain damage is largely permanent. Life will be more difficult when you have it. You cannot escape the effects of unsafe drinking – no matter what job you hold, how old you are, your gender, colour or race.

And it is preventable.

### **15. Is the Federal Government doing enough? If not, why not?**

We have ignored the reality of alcohol related brain damage for decades in this country which is ironic considering we have excellent research to understand and manage alcohol related brain damage. The Federal Government must acknowledge that alcohol related brain damage is a significant issue that affects the lives of millions of Australians, their families and carers. The Federal Government must, as a matter of utmost urgency put strategies into place that address this issue.

Alcohol related brain damage is preventable and there is an opportunity for Australia to be leading the way in its prevention. We are one of the few countries that has a service that specialises in the prevention of this disorder. Prevention, early screening and diagnosis, early intervention and specialist treatment are critical. These must be supported by the Federal Government. Yet there are no services outside of Melbourne that provide screening, diagnosis, specialist treatment, education and prevention through awareness raising, in the area of alcohol related brain damage.

### **16. What should the Federal Government be doing that they aren't doing?**

Every cent raised through taxes on alcohol should be spent on preventing and addressing alcohol related harm. This includes raising the awareness of little known but prevalent disorders such as alcohol related brain damage. Educating all Australians of the harms related to alcohol and shifting our culture away from one where alcohol is no longer just part of entertainment, but has become *the* entertainment. This message is particularly important for young Australians.

### **17. Is Australia alone with this issue or is it a global problem?**

Alcohol related brain damage is a global health problem. Not only is Australia not talking enough about alcohol related brain damage, neither is the rest of the world. It remains a little known yet highly prevalent disorder in many parts of world. *arbias* remains one of the few organisations in the world that specialises in the area of brain disorders associated with alcohol consumption. Our information is constantly sourced throughout many parts of the world by individuals, their families and carers and health providers who seek information in the area.

### **18. How does Australia compare to other countries with ARBI?**

Australia is one of the highest consumers of alcohol in the English speaking parts of the world. There are however, many countries where alcohol related brain damage is prevalent but remains undiagnosed and untreated. The UK, Republic of Ireland, US and many parts of Europe continue to consume alcohol at levels that risk brain damage. Similar to Australia, they have taken a head in the sand approach. This has led to a worsening of the problem with health services ill equipped to properly identify, address and most importantly prevent the disability.

### **19. Does the alcohol industry care about this issue ... if not, why not?**

The alcohol industry is part of the Australian community and it behaves no differently when it comes to alcohol related brain damage. The industry either does not know it exists and where it does, hold the same misconceptions and generally takes the 'head in the sand approach'. The alcohol industry, like the federal and state governments must, as a matter of urgency, acknowledge that brain damage caused by alcohol does exist.

When your product is directly responsible for considerable social, health and welfare issues in a country, it's almost understandable that you'd want to run for cover. However, a response by the alcohol industry based on fear will not work. A visible display of acknowledgement, taking ownership and a genuine approach based on concern for the Australian community is the only strategy that will work not only for those whose lives have adversely affected by alcohol but for the industry itself.

## **20. What should the alcohol industry be doing that they are not doing?**

The alcohol industry has an important and significant role to play in preventing what is becoming one of Australia's most prominent health issues. The alcohol industry must accept the hand it has played in one of Australia's most significant health problems. It has little choice but to acknowledge and then seek to address the serious and adverse affects of its products. The alcohol industry currently has an opportunity to avoid regulation through stringent government legislation before the Australian community and a growing number of health, welfare and criminal justice providers demand this. A genuine display by the alcohol industry of its sense of corporate social responsibility is far more preferable to the industry than regulation and it is currently notably absent.

The alcohol industry must, in the growing adversity to its corporate objectives take a very real and genuine commitment to its corporate social responsibility by reviewing its advertising standards, and the use of health-related messages on its product. Its approach needs to be genuine.

The alcohol industry must work with the government in supporting the less popular methods of increasing taxes, reducing the number of alcohol outlets and restricting trading hours. The alcohol industry must work in genuine partnership with brain injury services, mental health services, unemployment agencies, aged care providers and the criminal justice system. The alcohol industry has, through the sale of its products created a complex problem for all of these sectors of the Australian health and welfare sector and it has no other alternative but to financially support those who are left to pick up the pieces.

## **21. What can *arbias* offer people in terms of information?**

The *arbias* Website has information for people with alcohol related brain damage, family and carers, health practitioners. A multi lingual website offers information on alcohol related brain damage in 24 different languages. All of the information is available in downloadable format.

## **22. Where can they get it?**

By accessing the *arbias* website at [www.arbias.org.au](http://www.arbias.org.au)

## **23. How knowledgeable are Australian GPs about this issue ... if not, why not?**

There are GPs who are not aware of the problem or its high prevalence. While there are certainly a growing number of health professionals who are concerned about alcohol related brain damage they are not provided with the adequate resources to diagnose or refer those at risk or suspected of a brain disorder due to alcohol consumption. Unfortunately, when they do an effective job in early detection they refer to services whose wait lists are over 2 years long or have closed due to the overwhelming demand that cannot be met. In most parts of Australia, there is no where to refer an individual for an assessment or specialist follow up care.

#### **24. What should GPs be doing that they are not doing?**

Informing themselves, their patients and families of the very real risks associated with alcohol consumption. An awareness of the signs to look out for, so that those at risk or at the early stage of alcohol related brain damage can be referred to specialist services such as *arbias* for a neuropsychological assessment and follow up support. The AMA needs to work with alcohol agencies to raise the awareness of this highly prevalent yet unrecognised health issue with state and federal government. They can assist to advocate for better resourcing across Australia to diagnose and intervene early, before the brain damage is severe.

#### **25. How knowledgeable are professionals about the issue ... what should they be doing that they are not doing?**

Many health and welfare workers would be well versed on the effects of alcohol related brain damage. They see it every day and they understand the difficulties in dealing with brain damage caused by alcohol. They are often left without the necessary resources, training and information to support people whose needs are complex due to the damage that has been sustained. It can be very frustrating for example, to work with an individual who has absolutely no insight into their behaviour or cannot even remember to attend appointments. People with alcohol related brain damage may be unable to demonstrate genuine remorse for actions that have adversely affected themselves or others. It may be their frontal lobe functions are so impaired that they can no longer effectively control emotions or impulses. Their memory functions may be so damaged that actions or instructions cannot be remembered. People with ARBI whose needs cannot be met by partners or families may require one to one, 24 hour lifetime support. The costs of ARBI to the federal, state and local government, family, community and individual concerned are so profound it is difficult to describe the human costs let alone quantify the fiscal implications.

#### **26. Why are you personally concerned about ARBI and why do you have such a passion for this cause?**

Alcohol related brain damage affects everyday Australians and their families. It affects countless more people across the world. Yet Australia and the rest of the world barely know of its existence. The misconceptions surrounding alcohol related brain damage will only see a rise in what is a devastating and highly prevalent disorder. The fiscal costs are so high, they are becoming unquantifiable. The personal costs to human beings are tragic. Yet, this is all preventable.

We live in a rather uncompassionate world when it comes to disorders that are perceived to be self inflicted. People with alcohol related brain damage are more often than not treated poorly in our society. We can be embarrassed and ashamed of their existence. They are a reminder of the failings of our political and social make up.

Alcohol related brain damage is a human rights issue as much as it is a health issue. Given that almost all Australians have no idea of how little one needs to drink to sustain brain damage and that most people with brain damage caused through alcohol have no idea they have the impairment until it is severe – how can it possibly be considered ‘self inflicted’? It is certainly not purposeful self harm, in most cases it is a tragic consequence of a lack of understanding of the long-term consequences of alcohol use.

Human beings have the right to access knowledge and information particularly when it risks their health and livelihoods. When their lives are adversely affected due to a lack of this information and the appropriate support services, then they are fully entitled to a humane and compassionate response.

## **27. Do Australians even consider that alcohol can cause permanent brain damage?**

There are many misconceptions about alcohol related brain damage. There are many Australians who do not view alcohol as a drug for example. Yet it is very much a drug, a legal drug that is commonly used to self medicate a number of areas. Many Australians self medicate depression through alcohol, they medicate stress through alcohol, they medicate grief and loss via alcohol, they medicate fear, anxiety, loneliness all through a drug that is commonly and widely available with little understanding of its harmful effects.

It is not uncommon to be asked if there is a particular type of alcohol that causes brain damage. All alcohol products are potentially damaging. Most Australians do not know of the warning signs or symptoms of emerging alcohol related brain damage. When an individual has severe alcohol related brain damage, it will often be misdiagnosed by health professionals as a psychiatric disorder. This makes appropriate treatment to effectively support an individual almost impossible. Alcohol related brain damage is not an intellectual or psychiatric disability. It presents in very different ways. Quite often a person's intellect may appear intact. They may have no signs of mental illness. This makes it very difficult to understand destructive behaviour when there is little understanding or remorse displayed by the individual concerned.

## **28. Do we really understand as a society that alcohol does cause permanent brain damage?**

Society has almost no understanding of the high prevalence of alcohol related brain damage. Most Australian's would be shocked to hear that its prevalence in Australia could fill a state the size of Southern or Western Australia. Most Australians are under the misguided view that alcohol related brain damage is caused by drinking slabs of beer each day. When in fact, a few cans a day is enough to place some people at risk. Australians who have heard of alcohol related brain damage will often believe the myth that they will know once they have problems or are at risk. Unfortunately, you can be walking around today – blaming your short term memory loss and emotional outburst due to stress or age not knowing that these are the first symptoms of heading towards irreversible and life threatening damage.

## **29. How complicated is the brain as a tool and is it easy to damage it?**

The human brain is one of the more complicated yet fascinating parts of the human body. Still today, we have yet to fully uncover its full workings and the consequences of brain impairment for life as we know it. Like many parts of the human body it is fragile and can be irreversibly harmed through a range of drugs – alcohol being the top of the list as the most commonly used drug that damages the brain.

## **30. If the brain does suffer damage, what can happen next (i.e. what kinds of problems can start to appear?)**

Once the brain is damaged there are generally changes to a person's thinking, behaviour and personality. There are problems associated with maintaining a full and meaningful life because a person may be incapable of maintaining a job, relationship or their family home. If insight and awareness is impaired, it is not uncommon for an individual to present before the courts. Quite often the courts may have no understanding or knowledge of brain damage and the implications this has for a person's behaviour and subsequent and often tragic results.

As Australians, we can keep on misunderstanding, we can maintain our head in the sand approach, we can view it as a self inflicted disability even though the individual concerned, like most Australians, had no knowledge that what they considered 'social drinking' would eventually lead to brain damage. We can easily remain stuck in blame and ignorance – but the reality is, we have a social and health problem that is estimated to potentially affect 2 million Australians – the entire population size of Western Australia and no amount of blame or ignorance will address this fact.

How many millions of Australian lives need to be destroyed by alcohol before our community, government and the alcohol industry itself listens?