

MEDIA RELEASE

AER welcomes new standard drinking guidelines

6th March 2009: The Alcohol Education Rehabilitation Foundation (AER), Australia's leading alcohol harm minimisation body, today welcomed the release of the National Health & Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) revised 'Australian Alcohol Guidelines' which establish low risk drinking standards for all Australians.

Under the revised NHMRC guidelines, 'risky drinking' includes immediate risks such as violence, assault, motor vehicle accidents and intentional self harm as well as the long-term health effects from chronic diseases such as brain damage, liver disease, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. The guidelines set out advisory drinking levels which enable healthy adults to minimise the risks of suffering the short and long term harms of excessive alcohol consumption.

Professor Ian Webster, AER Board Director said "The subject of alcohol consumption is a sensitive one in our culture, and as a consequence there is a high degree of misinformation and misunderstanding around the topic of what constitutes risky drinking. It's important for Australians to be clear about what the NHMRC is actually saying in these guidelines. The guidelines state that if you – as an adult – have more than two standard drinks on any one day – then on the best evidence available you begin to increase the risk of incurring harm. Consumption of one or two standard drinks carries a one-in-one-hundred (1 in 100)¹ risk of incurring harm, and the risk rises with each subsequent drink.

"These are guidelines rather than rules or moral judgements about how much people should drink. They are not, for example, in any way comparable to the law regarding driving with a blood alcohol level over 0.05%. They are, rather, evidence-based statements about the level of risk we incur if we exceed the suggested levels," said Professor Webster.

"These guidelines represent an important advance on previous versions, in that for the first time the basis for estimating risk has been made explicit – i.e.; that risk level is defined as a one in one hundred level of risk of incurring either short

or long term harm. If we drink more than the recommended amount then, on the best evidence available, our level of risk rises above this level.

“To give some context for the level of risk used in the guidelines, the one in one hundred (1 in 100) low risk level set for alcohol is:

- slightly less than half the lifetime risk of dying of lung cancer in Australia which is one in forty one (1 in 41)²
- more than half the lifetime risk of dying of respiratory disease which is one in sixty two (1 in 62)²
- but three times higher than the lifetime risk level of dying from mental and behavioural disorders, which is one in three hundred and three (1 in 303)²

In these cases, of course, we have less control of our lifetime exposure, but presumably few of us would willingly increase our level of risk. Should we do so in the case of alcohol?.

“It is important to also note that these guidelines potentially underestimate the total level of risk, in that they take no account of the harm that drinkers all too frequently inflict on other people. These guidelines focus purely on the risk the drinker incurs to himself or herself.

“We know a lot more about the health risks associated with excessive drinking. Whilst it’s not a popular discussion to have, it would be remiss of those with the knowledge in this area, not to inform the community about these risks.

“Whilst this is a challenging area in which to be definitive, we commend the NHMRC on what has been an exhaustive effort, with more than 12 months consultation and involving a scientific assessment process using the best available data” said Professor Webster.

The low risk drinking guidelines³ recommend:

- two standard drinks per day for men and women
- four drinks for any one-off occasion
- zero drinks for children under 15 years of age. For people aged 15-17 years the safest option is to abstain, however if drinking does occur in this age group it should be at a low risk level and in a safe environment, supervised by adults
- zero drinks for pregnant and breastfeeding women

“AER welcomes the significant investment in this area and we look forward to cooperating with the Government, industry and community groups in helping raise people’s awareness of these guidelines” Professor Webster concluded.

¹ 1 in 100 level of risk (that is, one death for every 100 people who drink at that specified level and pattern).

² Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006. GRIM (General Record of Incidence of Mortality) Books. AIHW: Canberra.

³ [NHMRC Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Alcohol, March 6 2009](#)

- Ends-

Media Contact: Amanda McGregor, Launch Group

phone: 02 9270 0242, mobile: 0411 222 311, email: amanda@launchgroup.com.au

Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation (AER): AER is a not-for-profit company established in 2001 with a mandate to ‘change the way we drink’. AER was initially established with funding from a federal government grant and is now a perpetual trust. AER has built up a comprehensive understanding of the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) sector and is a leading grant giving body for community groups and programs within the alcohol sector. Through donations, grants and utilisation of the perpetual trust: AER seeks to prevent alcohol and licit substance abuse especially amongst disadvantaged, indigenous and young people; to support evidence-based treatment, research and prevention programs in the AOD sector; and to highlight the dangers of licit substance abuse and promote the responsible consumption of alcohol within the community. AER has funded more than 850 programs throughout Australia (30% of which are within the Indigenous community) including numerous programs which contribute to shifting community attitudes towards a responsible approach to alcohol consumption. For further information: <http://www.aerf.com.au>

1) About the NHM&RC Australian Alcohol Guidelines: The 2009 NHMRC safe drinking guidelines apply to men and women and sets a standard drinking level that will reduce both the risk of injury, violence and self harm, and the risk of developing alcohol-related diseases. The guideline limits are based on international epidemiological research that has quantified the risks of injuries and alcohol-related diseases after different levels of alcohol consumption (converted to Australian standard drinks) and with different patterns of drinking. The revised drinking guidelines were announced today.