

Alcohol

Much needs to be done

*The Hon. Chief Justice Trevor Riley,
Supreme Court of the Northern Territory*

Alice Springs is presently under intense scrutiny both locally and nationally. The focus of attention is the feeling of many local residents that they are suffering under an “avalanche” of crime. Although the focus is on Alice Springs, the concern is Territory wide.

The underlying causes of crime in the Territory are varied and complex, however one major cause is readily apparent - the abuse of alcohol. The statistics are telling. The criminal conduct that is causing so much concern throughout the Territory is fuelled by the excessive consumption of alcohol and the criminal activities of those who are seeking more alcohol.

If crime is to be reduced it is necessary that the vexed question of the abuse of alcohol, and how to contain it, be addressed. It is a difficult issue which should be discussed calmly and constructively by the community as a whole.

Russell Goldflam has observed in the cover story for this edition of *Balance*:

“[A]s has been documented over and over again in innumerable studies not just in Australia, but all over the world, the evidence is overwhelming: reducing supply reduces consumption, and reducing consumption reduces harm. Hard decisions must be taken.”

We do not have to look far to see the tragic human and economic consequences that accompany alcohol abuse. We need to think about how we can restrict the flow of alcohol to those who offend whilst under the influence of alcohol and how we can rehabilitate those for whom alcohol is such a destructive force. It is desirable to develop strategies that meet the problem before any crime is committed. This necessarily involves tighter control over the flow of alcohol into the community.

Reduction in the supply of alcohol is, of course, not a complete answer. Other strategies must be employed including providing to those concerned with such things as appropriate education, meaningful employment and other opportunities and, for those already affected, effective rehabilitation programs. However the sensible control of alcohol availability is a ready starting point.

The answer to the problem of alcohol abuse and the criminal conduct that flows from it does not lay exclusively with the Courts. The involvement of the Courts comes after a crime has been committed. It remains the fact that prevention is the better option. However the Courts are part of the process. It is plain that ever increasing sentences of imprisonment will not solve the problem. The Courts are, and should be, an essential part of the delivery of the rehabilitation processes available provided, of



course, that appropriate courses and facilities exist.

The Northern Territory Government has declared that it is committed to a stronger emphasis on breaking the cycle of offending and has announced a renewed focus on rehabilitation and training. It is also taking a fresh look at alcohol policy. Initiatives which pursue goals of prevention and rehabilitation are to be welcomed.

Efforts have been, and are being, made by the Legislature to provide a more targeted approach for those who have alcohol dependency and who commit less serious offences. For example there is now established the Alcohol Court which has been provided with enhanced powers to make orders in respect of such people, designed to provide an increased opportunity for rehabilitation.

This is a difficult issue. Much needs to be done. The present climate of awareness and concern provides the opportunity to endeavour to find and implement solutions. ●