



The Silent Epidemic:

TEENAGE
ALCOHOL
USE

ALCOHOL IS THE NUMBER ONE DRUG PROBLEM IN AMERICA, and its abuse among teenagers has reached epidemic proportions. A recent survey shows that teenage alcohol use in Utah is alarmingly high. Who can help fight the problem? YOU.

"Why should I be concerned about teenage alcohol problems?" That was my response to a group of citizens who approached me several years ago and asked me to get involved with Utah's Alcohol Policy Coalition. "I'm busy," I told them. "I have a full practice, I have a family, a church job, other community responsibilities, and lots of other things to do. Besides," I added, "this is Utah. Kids don't have alcohol problems in Utah." • "Oh!" they replied. We sat down, and they provided enough information about alcohol abuse in the United States and in Utah that I ended up as the Alcohol Policy Coalition's first chair.

BY GEORGE J. VAN KOMEN, M.D.

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THREE REASONS WHY I GOT INVOLVED

Conversations I had with three patients illuminated all the statistics I reviewed when I decided to join the fight against teenage alcohol abuse.

One patient was Connie,* who started seeing me four years ago, when she was only 15. She told me in her first visit to my office that, even though she came from a very active Latter-day Saint family, she was a recovering alcoholic. She developed a serious alcohol problem when she was 14, and after drinking abusively for a year, she entered an alcohol treatment facility. She said to me, "Doctor Van Komen, if there's anything you can do to prevent other young people like me from going through this terrible problem, please help."

I also visited with Mary,* whose husband had been a patient for over 12 years. For each of those years, I had told him with strong words that he should stop drinking alcohol. I told him that if he didn't stop, it would ruin his health and even kill him. He didn't stop. At the age of 40 he died from alcoholic cirrhosis. His successful career and his relationships with a loving family were cut short because of his alcohol abuse. After his funeral, his wife came to me and said, "Doctor Van Komen, my husband is dead, but if there is anything you can do to prevent this from happening to other husbands, please help."

A third patient was Elizabeth.* She and her husband were young retirees who were deeply and obviously in love. I enjoyed seeing them together in my office as patients. One holiday they went to the park for a picnic. On the way out of the park, they were hit by a car driven by an 18-year-old drunk driver. Elizabeth's husband died from his resulting injuries. In her grief she came to me and said, "Doctor Van Komen, my life is through. I can't enjoy living anymore without my husband. But if there is something you can do as a doctor to prevent what is going on out there in society today, please help."

Please help. How many times have we heard that phrase? That's why I got involved. I have seen the devastating effects of alcohol use on my patients, and I would guess that you have, too.

A NATIONAL LOOK AT TEENAGE ALCOHOL ABUSE

Since the National Minimum Drinking Age Act passed in 1984, it has been illegal for an individual under the age of 21 to purchase, possess, or consume an alcoholic beverage. But despite this law, teenage alcohol use is epidemic. Alcohol abuse is the most critical health problem facing our youth today.

- National studies indicate that 51 percent of junior and senior high school students have had at least one drink of alcohol within the past year.

Eight million students drink weekly, and nearly half a million binge weekly.¹

- Over 50 percent of all teenage deaths—of which the three leading causes are accidents, murder, and suicide—are alcohol-related.² The death rate for Americans aged 16 to 24 has climbed so high during the past decade that we now have a declining life expectancy for that age group (for the first time this century in this country for any age group) and the problem is primarily alcohol- and drug-related.³

- The leading cause of death among teenagers is alcohol-related automobile accidents. In 1989 more than 2,800 Americans between the ages of 15 and 20 died in alcohol-related car crashes.⁴ Recently the former Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. Otis R. Bowen, reported that approximately nine out of 10 automobile accidents involving teenagers are alcohol-related.⁵

- In a recent year, 92 percent of all graduating seniors admitted to having used an alcoholic beverage.⁶

- Perhaps the most alarming finding is that alcohol has been identified as a major "gateway drug" that leads to the use of other dangerous drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin.

WHAT IS ALCOHOL'S EFFECT ON AMERICAN SOCIETY IN GENERAL?

Without exception, alcohol is the number one drug problem in our country. Though proven to be a devastating drug, alcohol is commonly used, sparking tragedies of massive proportions.

- During the 20th century, alcohol has killed more Americans on our nation's highways than every war our country has ever fought, from the Revolutionary War to the recent Gulf War. Nearly 2.4 million Americans have died on our highways from alcohol-related traffic accidents this century.⁷

- Last year over 100,000 Americans lost their lives as a direct consequence of alcohol abuse.⁸

- Close to 20,000 Americans die every year from illicit drug abuse, and every year alcohol kills more Americans than all illicit drugs combined.⁹

Yet what is America's official response? Dr. C. Everett Koop, our past surgeon general, described how alcohol issues are handled in our country when he said, "In the alleged war on drugs, alcohol enjoys a battlefield exemption." Last year our government spent \$22 billion fighting drug abuse, but left our alcohol. The cost of alcohol abuse alone is \$76 billion annually.¹⁰



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When alcohol-consuming teenagers were asked why they drink, they overwhelmingly responded that they drink to get drunk.

In the United States we have three legal drugs: caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol. Alcohol is the only legal drug that is intoxicating and is essentially the same whether in a mixed drink, a glass of wine, or a can of beer. In nearly 75 percent of all fatal alcohol-related car crashes, the alcohol was beer.

A RECENT LOOK AT TEENAGE ALCOHOL ABUSE IN UTAH

With numerous national statistics in hand, the Alcohol Policy Coalition wanted to look more closely at alcohol use among Utah teenagers. Three qualified researchers—Raymond G. Briscoe, PhD; Don C. Larsen, PhD; and Richard R. Sudweeks, PhD—helped with the project. A grant from the Utah Medical Association helped finance it.

The survey was taken fall of 1990 and involved nearly 900 high school students between the ages of 14 and 17, representing 19 of Utah's 27 school districts. Just over 55 percent of its respondents were female; 44.4 percent were male. The sample's ethnic mix reflected Utah's demographic profile: 81.2 percent of its respondents were Caucasians and 14.8 percent were Hispanic, Black, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, or other group. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents were students from metropolitan school districts, while 33 percent represented the rural areas of the state. The percentages represented by grades 9 through 12 were 31.6, 34.5, 20.3, and 13.6, respectively. The respondents' religious affiliations were not directly identified, but they can be expected to reflect the general population of Utah, which is 78 percent Latter-day Saint, as reported in the 1991 *Deseret News Church Almanac*:

DOES THE LDS CHURCH PROTECT UTAH'S TEENAGERS FROM ALCOHOL ABUSE?

The survey concluded that the LDS Church—through its youth programs and its strong position against alcohol (primarily due to the Word of Wisdom)—does warn young people from alcohol use. Utah's rate of teenage alcohol abuse is much better than the national average. But alcohol use in Utah is still alarmingly high.

- Over 40 percent of the 14- to 17-year-old Utahns we surveyed said they had already used an alcoholic beverage. This figure supplements a recent state education survey, which reported that nearly 70 percent of Utah high school seniors had consumed alcohol. To give these statistics some LDS meaning—if you were a teacher of a Primary class of 10 ten-year-olds in Utah, by the time your students graduated from high school about 7 of them would have used alcohol, compared to a national average of 9 out of 10

youths of that age. The LDS Church offers some protection.

- The young students were asked questions about some important attitudes, such as, "Is it okay to break the rules if you don't get caught?" Thirty-eight percent said yes. Over one-third of the teenagers agreed with the statement "If I don't like a rule, I ignore it." If our young students are not worried about breaking a rule or a law, then when alcohol becomes available to them, they are much more likely to use it.
- They were also asked if they agreed with the statement "I love to do exciting and unusual things, even if they are dangerous." Frightening as it may sound, three out of four male respondents said yes, while over 50 percent of the females agreed. This risk-taking behavior leads many young people into alcohol consumption, even when they know that the consumption of alcoholic beverages is dangerous to their health and safety.
- The study was unable to show that a correlation exists between the number of friends a young person has and whether or not he or she uses alcohol. The loner is not the only young person to use alcoholic beverages; those who perceive themselves as having a lot of friends do, too.
- The study found that most young people enjoy school, but those who don't like school and feel that it is "a waste of time" have a very high propensity to use alcohol.
- When students were asked, "Do you cheat on tests?" the results were astonishing. Fully two-thirds of the participating students confessed that they were cheating in school.

THE EFFECTS OF SELF-ESTEEM AND PARENTAL SUPPORT ON ALCOHOL USE

The males in the survey had a better self-concept than females. While the Utah finding compares to national data, its variance seems to be greater. Why? Because young men have more opportunities for recognition and accomplishment. Some related findings are:

- Over 70 percent of the respondents lived with both parents, which is significant, because the study showed that students who live with both parents have a much lower risk of alcohol use or alcohol abuse than students living with one parent. Children in single-parent homes, living with a mother, a father, a stepmother, or a stepfather, face a higher risk of developing a problem with alcohol.

◦ Interestingly, our study indicated that self-esteem does not correlate with teenage alcohol consumption. Although high self-esteem is important, the study showed that self-esteem does not necessarily protect a teenager from early alcohol use.

◦ Parental support also differs among the two sexes, according to our study. Young males receive more parental support and have more latitude in breaking rules than females.

◦ One question asked, "Who understands you best?" Through the surveyed teenagers raised parents far higher than teachers, 40 percent of them did not relate well to any adult authority figure. These young people felt they must make their own decisions. When deciding if they will use alcoholic beverages, they do not have an adult figure to turn to for help.

ALCOHOL ADVERTISING AND AVAILABILITY— WHY TEENAGERS DRINK

The alcohol industry justifies their advertising frenzy by saying they are not encouraging young people to use alcoholic beverages. Their advertising, they tell us, is aimed at changing brand preference, not at encouraging people to consume alcohol or encouraging underage people to drink. But our study showed quite the opposite.

◦ We asked, "Does advertising influence teen drinking?" Seventy-six percent of the males and 65 percent of the females responded yes. In Utah, like the rest of the nation, the alcoholic beverages preferred by teenagers are wine coolers. National studies now indicate that over one-third of all wine coolers sold in our country are consumed by underage drinkers.

◦ We asked several questions about the availability of alcohol for teenagers in Utah. One question was, "How hard is it to obtain alcohol?" Despite Utah's having the strictest laws against underage purchasing and consumption of alcohol in the U.S., 89 percent of our 14- to 17-year-old respondents said alcohol was easy to obtain. We then asked, "Is alcohol too easy to obtain?" and 78 percent said yes. When asked, "Do present laws alter teen drinking?" 67 percent said no.

◦ When adults were asked why they drink alcoholic beverages, they told us they enjoy the social outlet and the taste. But when alcohol-consuming teenagers were asked why they drink, they overwhelmingly responded that they drink to get drunk. They said, "I don't worry when I'm drunk," and "When I'm drunk it's easier to relate

to others." Teenagers drink for different reasons than adults who choose to drink. Teenagers drink to feel intoxicated.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP STOP TEENAGE ALCOHOL ABUSE?

Utah's Alcohol Policy Coalition has worked in a number of areas to reduce alcohol problems, primarily focusing on the availability and advertising of alcoholic beverages. The coalition is broad-based in the community and has grown to 35 members including medical professionals, religious leaders from several denominations, alcohol and drug abuse counselors and prevention specialists, and consumer and parent organizations. We have worked on a number of legislative changes, including the removal of all outdoor advertising of alcohol in Utah. We worked closely with KSL-TV, which has become the first television station in the nation to voluntarily remove all local alcohol advertising (at a cost of nearly \$1 million per year). For this decision it has received tremendous admiration from alcohol advocacy groups nationally—and internal criticism from the broadcast industry.

This past year the Utah Legislature passed the "Not-A-Drop" Bill, which is the toughest teen drinking and driving bill in our country. The bill automatically suspends the driver's license of any Utahn under the age of 21 who drives with a detectable blood alcohol level. The Alcohol Policy Coalition played a very important part in assembling broad-based support for its passage.

Abraham Lincoln said, "Alcohol has many defenders, but no defense." Alcohol has been with us for thousands of years. Even Noah, the Book of Genesis reminds us, became shamefully drunk. A brochure written in the 1820s reported that if the money lost to alcohol abuse could be applied to the national debt, the national debt could be paid off in two years. Times (and the national debt) have changed, but the tremendous social, health, and safety problems associated with alcohol abuse have not.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are fortunate to have the Word of Wisdom, which states that "wine or strong drink . . . [are] not good" (D&C 89:5). The Prophet Joseph Smith revealed from God that alcohol was not good for mankind, yet today the world, including the youth of the Church, still struggles. Nearly 160 years after the Word of Wisdom revelation, alcohol is still the major drug problem facing our society.

As physicians we can play a powerful role in helping our patients and communities. Doctors need to act on the fact that alcohol abuse is not only a moral issue but also a health and safety issue of gigantic proportions.

Recently Bishop Glenn L. Pace stated in an LDS

Church general conference that working on social issues in our communities is a humanitarian service in which we should be actively engaged.⁵ As physicians we can make major contributions to reducing the health and social problems associated with alcohol abuse, especially among our youth. As my patients urged me, please help.

**Names of the three patients have been changed.*

NOTES

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6. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Louis W. Sullivan, M.D., Secretary, *Alcohol and Health, Seventh Special Report to the U.S. Congress* (1990).
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