New NT Liquor Act will make communities safer, reduce harm

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has congratulated the Northern Territory Government led by Michael Gunner on the passage of the Liquor Bill 2019.

“This is ground-breaking legislation. It will make a difference, further reducing alcohol-related harm including assaults, emergency hospital presentations and illegal secondary supply,” said NT PHAA spokesperson and Alice Springs GP, Dr Rosalie Schultz.

“It will reduce stress on frontline services, and support the health of families and communities over the long term,” said Dr Schultz.

The Bill which passed the Legislative Assembly last week is a significant rewrite of the Liquor Act 1978 as it adopts 70 recommendations from the 2017 Riley Review, including a risk-based licensing scheme and a dedicated Director of Liquor Licensing.

“The use of risk-based licensing means that liquor outlets which contribute to alcohol-related harm will pay more for their license. This spreads the cost of alcohol related harm to those who profit from sales of alcohol.”

“The establishment of the position of Director of Liquor Licensing ensures that the department has capacity to provide the time and expertise that compliance with liquor laws requires. “

“We are pleased the NT government has lived up to the hopes of the community, rather than react to special interests that erode the common good,” Dr Schultz said.

While it’s well understood that the Territory’s drinking culture contributes to high rates of crime including family violence, Dr Schultz says it’s less well known that a lot of harm is caused by regular drinking over the long term.

“Alcohol also contributes to a wide range of common conditions, including breast cancer and depression,” said Dr Schultz.

The NT’s new Liquor Act reflects the government’s commitment to reducing the supply of cheap alcohol with a minimum price policy.

“Cheap alcohol does the most harm, because young people are attracted to it, and the heaviest drinkers can buy more,” Dr Schultz explained.

Other important developments in the NT’s Liquor Act include the Banned Drinker Register, which bans high risk people from buying alcohol and others from supplying it to them; and the presence NT-wide of
uniformed officials, identified as “Police Auxiliary Liquor Inspectors” or PALIs at take-away alcohol outlets. These officers check that people buying alcohol plan to consume it legally.

“It’s great to see this initiative go territory-wide. In regional centres, PALIs have been replacing police since October 2018, freeing officers up to do other work,” said Dr Schultz.

Backed by hospital and police data, Dr Schultz has observed in her daily general practice that new inspectors and the minimum price policy are already reducing crime, violence, hospital presentations and demands on the NT’s stretched police force.

“After listening to the people of NT, and local and interstate experts, our government has modernised our Liquor Act. This will change people’s attitudes to alcohol and make the NT a healthier and safer place to live”.

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