Alcohol restrictions in Indigenous communities: necessary but not sufficient

Supply-reduction measures play a vital role in combating the devastating toll of excessive alcohol consumption in Australian Indigenous communities. The study by Margolis and colleagues in this issue of the Journal (page 503) shows an association between increasing alcohol restrictions and falling rates of serious injury in Aboriginal communities in Cape York, Queensland. As the authors acknowledge, their study does not address the sheer weight of evidence of worsening violence, disease and poverty. The continuing intensity of debate around Aboriginal policy in general, and the NTER in particular, shows that, to date, no new policy consensus has emerged to take its place.

In the meantime, however, pressing questions require answers. An especially relevant one here is: after restrictions on alcohol availability, what next? One of the lessons that emerges, not only from Cape York but from other studies of local alcohol management plans, is that governments that are willing to change regulations governing the sale of alcohol are much less energetic when it comes to finding the resources for, say, treatment and rehabilitation centres or other interventions. This is hardly surprising: it costs almost nothing to amend regulations, whereas most of the treatment options for alcohol misuse are expensive, difficult to staff (at least, in regional and remote settings) and of dubious effectiveness. Any moves to a more top-down approach also risk trampling on local community-based initiatives unless due recognition is accorded the latter.

In short, alcohol restrictions of the type assessed here have an important place in any strategic approach to preventing and managing Indigenous alcohol problems. Such strategies, however, raise at least two further questions. First, what processes will do most to ensure that the restrictions genuinely enhance community capacity to manage alcohol? and, second, what additional measures, apart from supply reduction, are required?

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References


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