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## Impact of Formal Alcohol Education

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## Alcohol Use is a Problem for Young People



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## Why School Based Education?

It is seen by government as the ideal prevention strategy

- it offers the potential to stop the next generation from experiencing problems
- Schools are places of learning and students are a captive audience
- 'Inoculate' students before they reach an age where use become attractive
- Assuage public concern about drug use by young people

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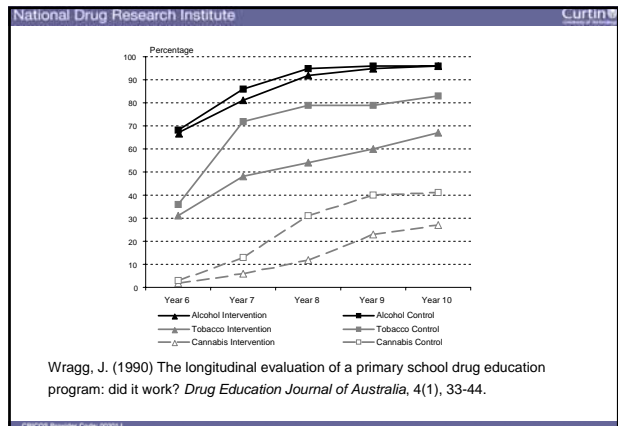
## The 1960s – Information Based Programs

- In the early 1960's, the dominant view that no education was good prevention, was challenged, and drug education expanded considerably during the decade
- Programs during this period drew on behaviour theory in developing their change strategies. Typically, so called factual information, was provided on the harmful effects of drug use in order to establish negative attitudes and a fear of use. However, information only approaches had little impact
- Kinder et al (1980) indicated that there was "little to support the notion that presenting factual information is an appropriate and effective method of changing attitudes and behaviour"

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## The 1980s – Social Inoculation

- A new generation of American programs emerged in the 1980s, based on social modelling theory. This held that young people begin to smoke, drink and use other drugs because of social pressure to do so from a variety of sources, such as the mass media, their peers and even the image they have of themselves. In order to successfully resist the adoption of undesirable behaviour, young people need to be inoculated by prior exposure to counter arguments and the opportunity to practice the desired coping behaviour.
- Australian drug education demonstration projects of the era similarly drew on this paradigm
- A study by Wragg (1990,1992) showed that students who received drug education based on social skills training were less likely to start using tobacco and cannabis. They also evidenced lower levels and more responsible patterns of use – **harm reduction**.



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## Is School Drug Education Effective Prevention?

- American Drug education programs such as Project Northlands and Life Skills Training (LST) have become much more sophisticated over the past 15-20 years and report positive results
- Meta analyses by Tobler and colleagues (2000) and White and Pitts (1998) indicated that particular program approaches can change drug use behaviour, although the effects tend to decay within a few years
- Babor and his colleagues (2003) in their book *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity*, rate prevention strategies on the basis of evidence of effectiveness. School alcohol education is assigned the lowest effectiveness ranking – evidence indicates a lack of effectiveness

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## Is School Drug Education Effective Prevention?

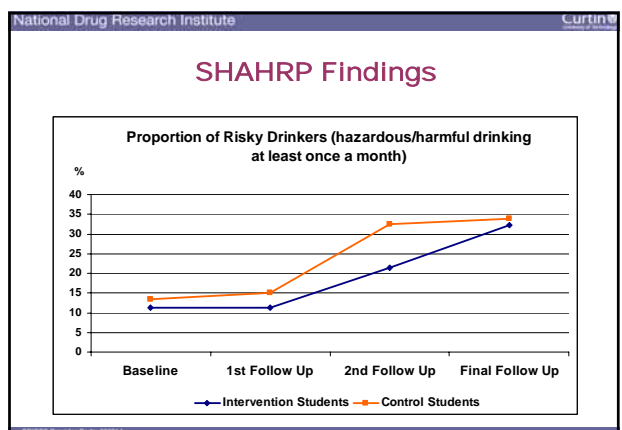
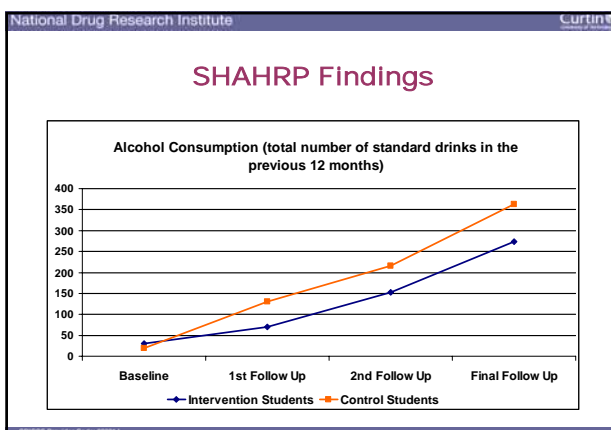
- The great majority of drug education research is conducted in the United States, where federal guidelines mandate that prevention programs emphasise zero tolerance and abstinence
- Consequently most programs reported in the literature are evaluated solely in terms of abstinence, and this is likely to remain an ongoing problem
- Most contemporary drug education research is simply not designed to explore if broader prevention benefits can be achieved. This is a paradoxical situation: drug education is not seen as particularly effective prevention, but the funding parameters that apply to much of the research limit its scope to identify effectiveness

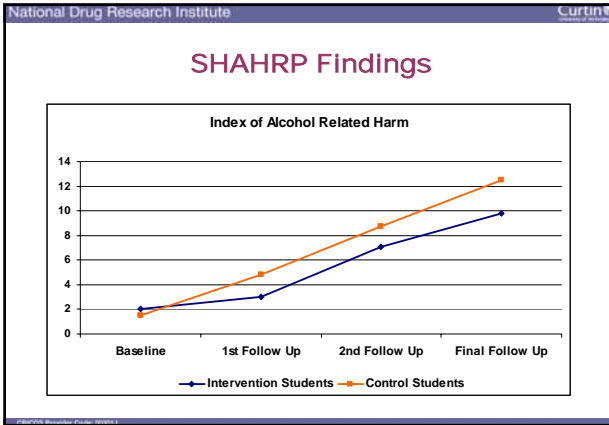
| Category                     | Component                       | Comment                                                                                        | Importance |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Research                     | Demonstration of Program Effect | Programs based on evidence of proven effect are more successful                                | Very High  |
| Context                      | Comprehensive Approach          | This involves whole of school and community wide support for classroom drug education messages | High       |
|                              | Based on Student Needs          | Drug education should be based on the experiences and interests of students                    | High       |
|                              | Timing of the Intervention      | Drug education should start before experimentation and continue as young people mature         | Moderate   |
| Goals and Strategies         | Realistic Prevention Goals      | Reducing harm can be as important as abstinence and delayed onset of use                       | Moderate   |
|                              | Interactive Teaching            | All students should be actively engaged in the learning process                                | Very High  |
|                              | Role of the Classroom Teacher   | Classroom teachers are in the best position to co-ordinate provision of drug education         | Moderate   |
| Program Content and Coverage | Role of Peers                   | Peer leaders should be used in place of or in combination with adult leaders where possible    | Moderate   |
|                              | Social Influence Approach       | Drug education programs based on the social influence approach are most effective              | High       |
|                              | Content                         | Certain content is essential                                                                   | High       |
|                              | Coverage                        | Programs should provide adequate coverage complemented by follow up booster sessions           | High       |

## The Evidence Base - Classroom Programs

### The SHAHRP Intervention – McBride et al 2004

- SHAHRP aimed to reduce alcohol related harm in junior high school students
- Over 2300 student from 14 Perth government high schools were involved in the study
- The intervention consisted of 17 skill-based activities in year eight and 12 follow up activities in year nine
- Activities included delivery of utility information, skill rehearsal, individual and small group decision making and discussions based on scenarios suggested by students
- The activities were designed to be as interactive as possible





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- ### SHAHRP Findings
- At final follow up, 17 months after program completion, students who received the alcohol education were only 4.2% less likely to consume at risky levels, whereas they were 22.9% less likely to experience alcohol related harm
  - Simply put, harm reduction education may not stop a young man drinking a six pack of beers at a party, but it does seem to teach him skills for staying safe such as not accepting a lift with a drunk driver

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- ### Whole of school/community approaches
- Research in the fields of mental health promotion, resilience, social capital and the structural determinants of wellbeing have led to an increasing awareness of the importance of an environmental approach to enhancing wellbeing
  - This has good theoretical support from social learning theory and is logically compelling in that what occurs within the limited time span of a formal prevention program is unlikely to have lasting effects if it is not reinforced by ongoing contextual influences. Accordingly, a supportive school and community environment should enhance what occurs in the classroom

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- ### Whole of school/community approaches
- The Gatehouse project in Victoria took a whole of school approach to the promotion of emotional and behavioural wellbeing of students as a means for reducing a range of health risk behaviours (Bond et al 2004). Results indicated that the intervention had some success in reducing alcohol and tobacco use, with drinking and smoking by intervention students consistently 3-5 percent less than controls.
  - Flay and colleagues (2004) evaluated two versions of the Aban Aya school social competence program for African American Youth: classroom only and classroom plus school climate, parent and community components. The research found that both programs were effective across a range of problem behaviours, but only for boys, and that the classroom plus program was on average more effective. Interestingly, the classroom plus program only decreased drug use a further 2% over the 32% decrease achieved by the classroom only version.

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## Drawing Some Conclusions

- Can we conclude, as Babor and his colleagues did, that alcohol education is ineffective, or is that sufficient high quality research has not been done?
- Is it even fair to assess the worth of school alcohol education in isolation, rather than as a component within the broader community response that shapes normative use?
- How much change is meaningful? White and Pitts (1998) in their meta analysis of well conducted drug education studies calculated a combined effect size of 0.037, which means that only 3.7% of those receiving the education would delay use or not use. However, they compared this with an investigation into the effect of aspirin on heart attack rates that was discontinued when an effect size of 0.034 was reached, because it was considered unethical to withhold this treatment from the controls

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## Drawing Some Conclusions

- Caulkins et al (2004) reported that model school drug education in the United States produced a social benefit saving of US\$840, of which 28% related to alcohol. Program costs were \$150. This is a very favourable cost benefit ratio and is likely to be repeated in this country if well evaluated model programs are implemented. Sound, school drug education programs are a wise use of public funds according to Caulkins et al (2004), not because they swiftly eliminate a large proportion of drug use, but because they contribute to incremental reduction across the whole population
- School based alcohol education is an important mechanism for transmitting social norms on the use of alcohol and developing responsible drinking skills in young people. Its flaws are not an argument for abandonment, they are an argument for improvement
- **We need well evaluated, Australian model programs**

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## Drawing Some Conclusions

- ***Education is needed: it is democracy***  
Craplet (2006)