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# The Health Reformer

***"Social norms" alcohol awareness programs—touted by the liquor industry—have not only failed to reduce student drinking, but may have increased it***

Parents feel a great sense of relief when they learn that the college they have sent their precious child to conducts extensive alcohol education programs to help new students deal with the issues of drinking. Yet, these same parents might be horrified to learn that the alcohol industry is actually funding and setting the tone and message conveyed through many of these college alcohol awareness programs. "Social norms" is the latest hot ticket in industry-funded alcohol "education." All the big brewers are touting social norms, including Anheuser-Busch, Miller and Coors. As early as November 2000, Anheuser-Busch had pledged \$400,000 to fund social norms campaigns at seven schools. The industry likes social norms because it downplays the level of the college drinking problem; it won't seriously interfere with high traffic consumption and it looks like a positive effort is being made. *Join Together Online, 7/15/2002*

NOTE: The Harvard School of Public Health's new College Alcohol Study finds that the "social-norms" marketing campaigns implemented at many colleges and universities throughout the country have not only failed to reduce student drinking, but may have increased it, MSNBC reported July 23.

The popular campaigns -- often promoted by the alcohol industry -- are designed to curb alcohol use on campus by showing students through posters and ads that their peers don't drink as much alcohol as they might think. The campaign is in use at several large universities, including the University of Arizona, the University of Virginia, and the University of North Carolina.

The Harvard study examined 37 schools that used the social-norms campaign and 61 that didn't. Researchers measured seven student drinking behaviors, from casual to heavy drinking.

The researchers found that students were drinking just as much at schools that had the campaign, and, in many cases, even more than at schools without the program.

"It's simple, it's cheap, it makes everybody look good. It makes the college look good because it says there's less drinking there than people think," said Henry Wechsler, director of the Harvard study. "The only problem is, it doesn't seem to work."

The Harvard study contradicts previous studies that show that schools with social-norms programs have

significantly lowered college drinking...

Findings from the Harvard study are published in the July 2003 issue of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol. *Join Together Online, 7/24/2003*

***It's mainly grown-ups who are getting healthier, not kids***

It's mainly the grown-ups who are exercising, losing weight, quitting tobacco, and becoming more health-conscious.

But it's a different story for kids. "Since the early 1960s the general health of adolescents has declined," says the American Academy of Pediatrics. "Today's kids are flabby. They don't have the proper cardiovascular tone. They are not physically fit."

Television certainly has had an impact. Time spent in front of the TV set is time taken away from body-building, calorie-burning physical activities such as bicycling, skating, basketball, or climbing trees. That sets the stage for excessive weight gain, which in itself is a risk factor for high blood cholesterol and heart disease.

Exercise physiologist Kate O'Shea warns that "the junior couch potato of today is the fat farm candidate of tomorrow."

**Don't school PE programs help?**

Only a few require students to take physical education in all grades. In an era of tight budgets and teacher shortages, health and physical education programs are often among the first to go.

**What about children's eating habits?**

With nine out of 10 Saturday-morning food advertisements on the networks hawking processed foods, high in sugar, fat, and salt, television significantly influences the food preferences of children from their earliest years.

Home-cooked, sitting-down-around-the-table meals are now the exception in most American homes, being largely replaced by fast foods and engineered foods. More than half of today's high school kids head off to fast-food chains and snack machines instead of school lunch rooms.

**Any good news?**

The good news is that children can be taught—and the younger they get started, the better.

...."Fitness can be fun," says Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was President Bush's spokesman for the Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. "Stay away from junk food, get off the

(Over, please)

couch, unplug the Nintendo, turn off the TV, and go out and get some exercise. A body is a terrible thing to waste."

*Health Power—Health by Choice Not Chance*

### ***Too many teens see alcohol as a safe alternative to illegal drugs***

Too many teens see alcohol as a safe alternative to illegal drugs, and adults who tolerate their drinking only reinforce that dangerous misconception, area social workers say.

"Because alcohol is sold in grocery stores, teens have the impression that it's safer than it really is," said Kate Mahoney, executive director of Peer Services, an agency with offices in Evanston and Glenview that provides prevention, early intervention and outpatient treatment for youth and adults with alcohol and substance-abuse problems.

Social worker Sabrina Nichols said she believes too many adults "underplay" alcohol use among teens, until they are shocked by an incident like the recent powder puff hazing that sent five Glenbrook North High School students to the hospital.

"Using alcohol is more generally accepted by adults, so I do think it's swept under the carpet until there are incidents like this," said Nichols, program coordinator a substance abuse outpatient program for Evanston Northwestern HealthCare.

"I think it's a very big problem," Nichols added. "Kids are using more than what they actually say they are; there are tons and tons of kids coming into treatment, and in their peer group, most of their friends are also drinking."

...Northbrook Police Department social worker Nancy Vacarro said she's noticed that more youngsters are beginning to use alcohol as middle school students, a trend she finds disturbing because "it's very easy to become addicted if you're starting at a young age."

She doesn't believe affluence makes kids more likely to use alcohol, and Nichols agreed that "what you see on the North Shore is pretty reflective of what you see across the country."

Across Illinois, many students reported that they were often able to gain easy access to alcohol, with "less than 20 percent" saying that alcohol would be "very hard to obtain."

Nichols said some of her clients have been able to purchase fake drivers' licenses or rely on older brothers or sisters, or even parents, to get them alcohol.

...With society promoting drinking as a way to combat stress or relax in tense social situations, adults need to communicate to the teens in their lives that drinking is not an acceptable response, the social workers and counselors agreed.

Too many parents condone their teens' drinking, Nichols said, "because a lot of parents think it's normal to be drinking and to experiment. They think it's expected of kids, and they give mixed messages. A lot of parents are trying to be friends with their kids."

They may allow drinking in their own homes because they believe they are protecting their teens from more threatening circumstances.

But that's not the message kids get from that decision, Nichols said.

"They'll think if I can have alcohol at this person's house, then I can have it at the beach," she explained.

She said parents should set aside a time to talk with their teens ever week and also keep track of "who your kids are hanging out with, and what their parents are like," although she noted that cell phones make it easier for teens to be deceptive.

Mahoney said the entire community -- from faith-based organizations to the media and parents -- needs to present a united front against teen drinking.

She encouraged parents to monitor the alcohol supply in their own homes, "know where your teens are going and be awake when your teens come home."

Vacarro praised alcohol prevention efforts at the Glenbrook High Schools, especially a program that has high school students who have pledged to stay sober share their lifestyle decision with local middle school students.

*By Sara Loeb, staff writer, EVANSTON REVIEW—May 22, 2003*

**Teens should always keep this in mind:** "Intoxication is just as really produced by wine, beer, and cider as by stronger drinks. The use of these drinks awakens the taste for those that are stronger, and thus the liquor habit is established. Moderate drinking is the school in which men are educated for the drunkard's career. Yet so insidious is the work of these milder stimulants that the highway to drunkenness is entered before the victim suspects his danger." *The Ministry of Healing, p.332*

### ***Medical Textbooks Surprisingly Condone Drinking While Pregnant***

A review of 81 obstetrics textbooks found that the majority still condones drinking during pregnancy, even through public-health officials have promoted abstinence for two decades, HealthScout News reported July 17.

Researchers at the Virginia Commonwealth University found that only 14 of the 81 medical textbooks reviewed had consistent recommendations not to drink. In textbooks published since 1991, only 7 of the 29 consistently recommended no alcohol during pregnancy.

"I didn't expect so many recent textbooks to actually condone drinking," said Dr. Mary Nettleman, professor of medicine at Virginia Commonwealth University and lead author of the study. "All the major organizations, such as the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Academy of Pediatrics, public-health organizations -- all advocate zero drinking during pregnancy."

Dr. Karen Filkins, an associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UCLA School of Medicine, said she wasn't "totally surprised" by the study's findings. "I think there is a hesitation to put something so strong like banning drinking during pregnancy in the textbook," she said.

Filkins added, "I think textbooks should discuss it the way I do. For those who have had inadvertent exposure, there is no reason to panic. However, there is no known lower level of safety. The policy and the stance should be 'no alcohol during pregnancy.' But the textbooks ought to address both the 'no-alcohol' policy and the inadvertent-alcohol situation."

Previous studies have proven that drinking alcohol during pregnancy can result in both physical and mental birth defects.

The study is published in the July 2002 issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. *Join Together Online, 7/30/2002*

Note: If women did not drink while they were pregnant, there would not be another case of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. It is the only known birth defect that is 100% preventable.

*Texas Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Consortium*

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