

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2003. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

### **Media Bites: MIXED MESSAGES**

Their timing was both impeccable and awful. Three gorgeous young women fluttered, in their slinkiest party outfits, around an equally beautiful young man.

He was strategically placed, at the centre of their attention, with a champagne bottle in one hand. All four were laughing, as if at some private joke, while he topped up their glasses.

The message was not subtle - drinking is fun; it's glamorous; and it's how cool people celebrate.

That's the pitch that we get all the time from alcohol advertisements. Except that this carefully crafted picture of the four happy drinkers wasn't an ad.

It was the cover image celebrating the 21st birthday of Good Living, an upmarket lifestyle supplement of the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper.

It hit our doorstep in the same week that radio talkback hosts and other sections of the media went into meltdown about young people and alcohol.

The catalyst was a series of violent events at teenage parties, including one death, coinciding with a "new study" showing alarming rates of binge drinking among youth.

The contradiction of the media portrayals of alcohol - of airbrushed glamour versus real world tragedy - is echoed more broadly in societal attitudes.

There's more than a touch of hypocrisy on display when the adult world wrings its hands over young people drinking.

These are, no doubt, often the same adults who pour themselves a hefty slug to cope with life's stresses, or who marry two great Australian traditions by celebrating a sporting victory with a glass or six.

Perhaps they even work in the huge industry which has been so successful at associating grog with groovy.

The beauty of expressing moral outrage about youth drinking is that it somehow distances the rest of us from it. It's someone else's problem.

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre's Paul Dillon argues that too much emphasis has been put on peer pressure, letting adults off the hook.

It's parents and other adults who often directly, through buying the stuff, or indirectly, through their own behaviour, encourage kids to drink, he says.

"It's very confronting for parents to have to acknowledge there may be problems with their children's drinking because then they have to acknowledge they may have problems with their own drinking," he says.

By the way, the "latest" figures on youth drinking came from a general review of young women's health, in the Medical Journal of Australia.

It cited, amongst other things, a survey of nearly 15,000 women aged 18 to 23, published in 2000, which found that 70 per cent reported binge drinking, one quarter of whom did so at least weekly.

The other was a small poll by Roy Morgan Research for the Salvation Army. You might wonder about some of its more sweeping conclusions given that the sample included just 70 people under 19.

But its findings are broadly in line with many other studies cited in documents to be considered at the NSW Government's Alcohol Summit next month.

The NHMRC's National Alcohol Guidelines, for example, say people under 18 are more likely to drink in a high risk manner than any other section of the Australian community.

Here's another irony: the cover of the guidelines and related documents feature mouth-watering photographs of sleek, sexy bottles of wine and glasses of beer. Talk about mixed messages.